Prajjwal Chandra

Master Beyond Branding

Rhythm Over Algorithm

2025

Elisava

Master’s Thesis

Rhythm Over Algorithm

Prajjwal Chandra

2025

Contents

Introduction

Context **01**
Ages of Media Discovery **02**
Convenience vs Freedom **05**
The Questions **08**

Algorithmic Experience (AX) & Aesthetics

Internalizing Recommendation Engines **10**

Spotify as a Brand

Brand Values, UX philosophy and Visual Identity **14**
Features & Campaigns **17**
Inside the Algo-engine **20**
Spotify Dark Mode **23**

Design Proposals

Designing Against the Algorithm **27**
Passport - Geographic Discovery **29**
Iceberg - Genre Discovery **33**
List of Genres **38**
Headroom - Shared Exploration **41**

Conclusions & Future Directions

Key Findings against Research Questions **46**
Limitations & Open Questions **48**

Gallery **51**

Introduction

00

Context

Streaming platforms have changed how we find music—but not always for the better. With personalization engines constantly refining suggestions based on listening history, mood tags, and behavior patterns, many users find themselves stuck in a loop. The playlists are accurate, the tracks are familiar, and the experience is smooth. But something is missing. Discovery has become passive. Surprise is rare. And listeners—especially younger ones—are starting to notice.

This project began with that tension. On one hand, Spotify and similar platforms offer unprecedented access to global sound. On the other, they quietly narrow our paths through it. Personalization, for all its power, tends to favor what's already known or adjacent. It rarely invites us to take real risks or wander outside our bubbles. The result is a listening culture defined by convenience, not curiosity.

At the same time, trust in these platforms is eroding. Listeners are beginning to ask how their tastes are being shaped, what gets prioritized, and why. There's a growing desire for transparency—systems that don't just predict but explain. There's also a renewed interest in control: having the option to pick rather than being nudged. And perhaps most importantly, there's a longing for connection—for ways to share music in real time, socially and emotionally, beyond feed-based sharing.

The research questions explored in this project aim to unpack those feelings and test design responses. What happens when users are given simple, visible choices? Does cultural context matter more than collaborative filtering? Can music discovery become more spatial, more emotional, or more social without feeling overwhelming? How do we create space for serendipity without losing flow?

To explore these, three speculative features were designed:

Passport, which lets users explore music by region, curated by local tastemakers.

Iceberg, which visualizes genre depth and reveals overlooked sub-genres.

Headroom, a shared listening space inspired by event posters and real-time radio culture.

Each feature was an attempt to nudge the platform slightly off-course.

As streaming becomes more embedded in everyday life, the stakes grow higher. We're shaping how people fall in love with music. This project is a small step toward giving them more space, more voice, and more ways to listen like it matters.

To listen is to understand.

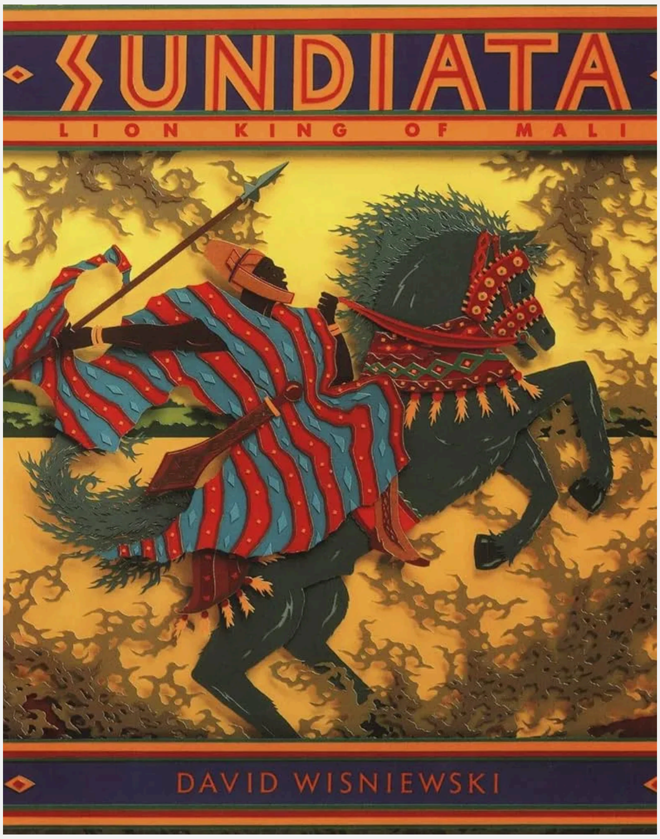
Ages of Media Discovery

In the earliest human communities, music and story were inseparable, carried forward by oral tradition long before any symbol could capture a note or a lyric. In the Sahel region of West Africa, the epic of Sundiata Keita—founder of the Mali Empire—survives not in parchment but in the voices of jelis, or griots, who have, for centuries, woven history and melody into a single performance [1]. Field recordings from the 1950s capture Mamoudou Kouyaté, a direct descendant of that line of storytellers, intoning the saga in rhythmic refrains that his ancestors first sang more than seven hundred years earlier [2]. In those moments, every listener became both student and performer: one voice would intone a phrase, the next would echo and transform it, and thus the tale—and its tune—traveled beyond any single locale. Without fixed scores or printed songs, memory and improvisation reigned supreme, granting individuals agency to reshape melodies with each retelling and to carry them into neighboring villages, courts, or marketplaces.

As centuries unfolded and powers grew intent on unifying liturgical practice across vast territories, the need for permanent records of sacred chant became urgent. In the early eleventh century, an Italian monk named Guido d'Arezzo introduced a four-line staff and the solmization syllables—ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la—that would form the backbone of Western notation [3]. According to his own account, Guido demonstrated this system before Pope John XIX by presenting the hymn "Ut queant laxis," and, to all astonishment, the Pope sang a previously unknown verse perfectly after only one hearing [4]. This moment bridged memory and manuscript, giving communities a shared reference point and setting the stage for seven centuries of manuscript copying in monastic scriptoria, where costly vellum and ink confined musical literacy largely to the clergy and their students.

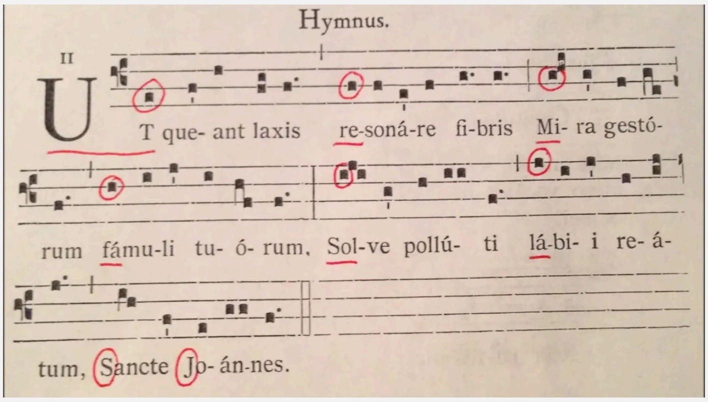
The invention of music printing at the dawn of the sixteenth century further widened participation. In 1501, Venetian printer Ottaviano Petrucci issued the Harmonice Musices Odhecaton, the first book of polyphonic music produced with movable type, containing ninety-six secular chansons by leading composers of the day [5]. A patent granted by the Venetian Senate in 1498 had secured Petrucci's method for two decades, enabling him to refine a double-impression technique that rendered staff lines and notes with unprecedented clarity [6]. Printed songbooks and lute tablatures began to appear in urban shops, inviting amateur keyboardists, lutenists, and vocal ensembles into a burgeoning culture of home performance. Music ceased to be the monopoly of cathedral choirs and noble courts; it became a centerpiece of domestic life in households across Europe, fueling a taste for new dances, madrigals, and instructional manuals.

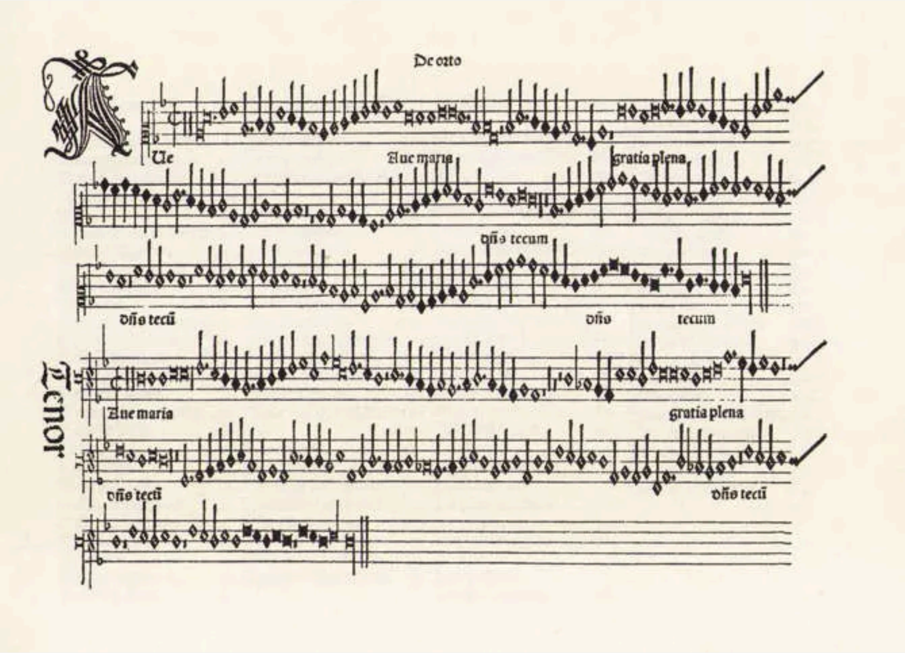
The nineteenth century brought an even more radical shift: the fixation of sound itself. On December 6, 1877, Thomas Edison strode into the New York offices of *Scientific American* and demonstrated his tinfoil phonograph with the now-famous words, "Good morning...how do you do? How do you like the phonograph?" [7]. From wax cylinders to 78 RPM shellac discs, mechanical reproduction allowed listeners to replay identical performances at will, severing music from the ephemerality of live events [8]. Record stores emerged as the new salons: patrons browsed by genre or performer, sampled cylinders or discs in listening booths, and curated personal collections that reflected both taste and status. The act of collecting became a form of discovery, as liner catalogs and dealer recommendations guided listeners toward the latest operatic arias, ragtime hits, or world music curiosities.


SUNDIATA
LION KING OF MALI
DAVID WISNIEWSKI

Sundiata Keita was a prince and founder of the Mali Empire. The Malian ruler Mansa Musa, who made a pilgrimage to Mecca, was his great-nephew.

Ut queant laxis (Para 2)


Hymnus.
II
UT que- ant laxis re-soná-re fi-bris Mi- ra gestó-
rum fámu-li tu- ó- rum, Sol-ve pollú- ti lá-bi- i re- á-
tum, Sancte Jo- án-nes.


De orto
Ave
Aue maria
gratia plena
dñs tecum
dñs tecū
dñs
tecum
Tenor
Aue maria
gratia plena
dñs tecū
dñs tecū

Harmonice Musices Odhecaton (para 3)

In the early twentieth century, broadcast radio and the humble jukebox brought recorded sound to ever-larger audiences. Cleveland DJ Alan Freed, whose "Moondog Show" launched in 1951, famously coined the term "rock 'n' roll" as he played rhythm and blues records for predominantly white listeners, forging a new cultural bridge and national audience for Black artists [9, 10]. Families gathered around their AM sets for appointment listening, while teenagers in diners dropped coins into jukeboxes to select 45 RPM singles of crooners, swing orchestras.

The postwar decades witnessed the rise of the album and the record store as cultural hub. In 1960, Russell Solomon converted his father's drugstore racks in Sacramento into the first Tower Records outlet, complete with in-store listening booths that let customers preview vinyl by artists from around the world [11]. LPs, cassettes, and later compact discs carried not just tracks but artwork, liner notes, and essays that offered background on the musicians' creative process, production techniques, and social context. Fans poured over gatefold sleeves, read producer credits, and debated pressing quality, forging bonds in denim-clad aisles and weekly mix shows. The mixtape—born with portable cassette recorders—became a personal artifact, passed among friends as a deeply curated statement of taste and identity.

By the late 1990s, digital compression and internet connectivity disrupted the entire model of music ownership. On June 1, 1999, Shawn Fanning and Sean Parker released Napster, a peer-to-peer service enabling millions to swap MP3 files directly from their desktops, effectively declaring that "music was set free" [12, 13]. Napster's revolutionary yet legally fraught success peeled open listeners' horizons—rare live recordings, international artists, bootleg concerts—while also flooding the web with mislabeled or low-fidelity files that turned discovery into an exercise in serendipity and patience. Apple's 2003 debut of the iTunes Store then offered a legal counterpoint: users could purchase single tracks with embedded artwork and metadata, building portable libraries on MP3 players that roamed from earbuds to car stereos [14].

Today, streaming services represent the latest paradigm, blending massive catalogs with sophisticated recommendation engines. Spotify's *Discover Weekly*, launched in July 2015, has been streamed for over 2.3 billion hours as of mid-2020—a measure of how algorithmic curation can introduce listeners to both comfortingly familiar and startlingly new tracks [15, 16]. These platforms employ collaborative filtering, audio analysis, and editorial playlists to guide taste, while social features let users share discoveries, build collaborative playlists, and broadcast listening activity. Despite concerns about filter bubbles, the combination of data-driven suggestions and human-curated lists strives to balance serendipity and agency, giving listeners multiple entry points into an ever-expanding sonic universe.

Across these ages, the tension between control and chance, professional gatekeeping and communal exchange, has shaped how music spreads and how individuals encounter it. In every age, from the torchlit circles of oral bards to the personalized feeds on smartphone screens, discovery has been both a personal journey and a collective act. As we look toward immersive VR concerts, AI-driven composition, and context-aware sonic environments, the story continues: each innovation invites us to reconsider who guides our musical paths, who shares in our revelations, and how the next melody will find its way into our lives.

[1] Epic of Sundiata - Wikipedia
[2] Sundiata/The Words of the Griot Mamadou Kouyate - LitCharts
[3] The Hymn Ut Queant Laxis - Neumz Gregorian Chant
[4] Pope John XIX and Music History - OnePeterFive
[5] Harmonice Musices Odhecaton - Amherst Early Music
[6] Petrucci's Printing Method - History of Information
[7] Edison's Phonograph - On This Day
[8] Edison's First Recording - Ingliando
[9] Alan Freed - Wikipedia
[10] Alan Freed - Cleveland Historical
[11] Tower Records History - Capital Public Radio
[12] Napster - Wikipedia
[13] The Day the Napster Died - WIRED
[14] iTunes Store History - History of Information
[15] Spotify Discover Weekly Statistics - Spotify Newsroom
[16] Five Years of Discovery - Spotify Ads

Convenience vs Freedom

In the digital age, platforms promise seamless experiences—one-tap access, autoplay queues, and algorithmically curated feeds—yet this ease can subtly corrode the very agency we value. True freedom in exploration arises not from frictionless paths dictated by code, but from the ability to diverge, question, and chart one's own course. Designers and researchers increasingly recognize that reducing every decision to a data-driven suggestion risks creating echo chambers and passive consumption habits that undermine user autonomy. Balancing convenience with freedom requires intentional design: blending automated assistance with transparent controls, serendipity tools, and manual discovery options that empower users to engage actively rather than be guided unthinkingly through pre-set pipelines[1,2].

Digital platforms often equate success with smooth, seamless flows—minimizing clicks, pre-fetching content, and auto-playing the next track without prompting. While these mechanisms lower barriers, they frame user journeys within algorithmic parameters that assume past behavior predicts future preference. When interfaces prioritize convenience above all, they risk eroding the user's sense of ownership over the experience. As UX experts warn, fostering genuine engagement and satisfaction hinges on granting real control: users must feel they can pause, modify, or override automated pathways at any point, preserving confidence and preventing frustration[3].

Underneath this drive for streamlining lies the phenomenon of algorithmic echo chambers, where personalized recommendations reinforce existing tastes and narrow exposure. Research into AI-driven filtering shows that black-box systems, by prioritizing content similar to what users have already consumed, implicitly discourage divergence and reinforce silos of familiar material[4]. Ethnographic studies of social media reveal how these loops can restrict users' digital rights to access diverse viewpoints, ultimately homogenizing online culture and diminishing the richness of discovery[5].

Autoplay features compound this effect by encouraging passive consumption. A study of Netflix viewing patterns found that disabling autoplay increased users' awareness of their media habits and reduced total watch time, underscoring how unprompted queues can hijack attention and erode reflective choice[6]. Parallel research on video platforms demonstrates that giving users control over autoplay interrupts the "rabbit hole" spiral into increasingly extreme content, helping viewers maintain a conscious stance toward their selections[7]. In musical contexts, endless play invites listeners to cede critical engagement, replacing intentional exploration with background noise.

Paradoxically, an abundance of personalized playlists and recommendation widgets can create the illusion of endless choice while subtly guiding users down the same data-driven corridors. Behavioral psychologists describe this as the "paradox of choice," where too many options lead to decision paralysis and diminished satisfaction[8]. Usability research concurs that simplicity often wins: fewer, well-curated options enable more confident decisions and deeper engagement, whereas featuritis—an overload of choices—exhausts users and dilutes their sense of autonomy[9].

To counteract these trends, designers turn to "serendipity engines" that cultivate happy accidents and reveal unanticipated connections. By introducing randomness or controlled surprise—such as a "mystery track" button—platforms can spark moments of delight and broaden horizons beyond algorithmic comfort zones[10]. Academic investigations into digital serendipity conceptualize it as an experiential quality that must be carefully crafted through improvisational interactions, leveraging human curiosity to override predictive models[11]. Theoretical work on "artificial serendipity" maps out techniques for embedding unexpected discoveries within structured flows, ensuring that surprise enhances rather than disrupts user journeys[12].

Equally crucial is transparency in recommendation algorithms. Studies in autonomous driving interfaces show that users feel safer and more in control when systems explain their reasoning both during and after interactions[13]. In recommender systems, layered explanations—highlighting why a song was suggested based on shared attributes with known favorites—allow users to scrutinize, verify, and adjust their profiles, thereby reinforcing autonomy and trust in the platform[14].

Practical "natural choice" options further ground user freedom. Alongside algorithmic feeds, manual filters—by genre, era, tempo, or region—give listeners direct authority over discovery parameters. UX research underscores the value of mixing automated scores with human-driven selectors, enabling a hybrid model that respects personal curiosity while harnessing data insights[15]. Nielsen Norman Group guidelines recommend calibrating choice sets to user expertise and goals, ensuring neither overload nor undue constraint[16].

Geographic and contextual discovery features extend freedom by situating music within place-based explorations. Spotify's localized playlists, powered by big-data analytics paired with geo-streaming data, illustrate how context can guide users to unfamiliar artists tied to specific regions, forging genuine cultural discovery beyond taste-echo corridors[17]. Similarly, social sharing tools and collaborative playlists invite users to co-curate content, blending personal networks with algorithmic suggestions to create communal discovery spaces that transcend isolated profiles[18].

Ultimately, achieving the ideal balance between convenience and freedom requires a design ethos that honors both efficiency and agency. Research on user autonomy highlights that when people can back out of processes easily—undo actions, access clear exits—they retain confidence and a feeling of control, whether interacting with complex systems or music apps[19]. By embedding reversible actions, transparent explanations, manual controls, serendipity moments, and contextual discovery, platforms can transform passive consumption into active engagement.

As digital experiences continue to evolve—with AI-driven composition, immersive virtual concerts, and adaptive soundscapes on the horizon—the imperative remains the same: convenience must serve freedom, not supplant it. When users feel empowered to question recommendations, tweak filters, and embrace the unexpected, they reclaim the richness of exploration that underpins musical discovery and human creativity. In this delicate balance, design becomes not just a matter of streamlining flows, but a means of safeguarding the very autonomy that makes digital interactions meaningful.

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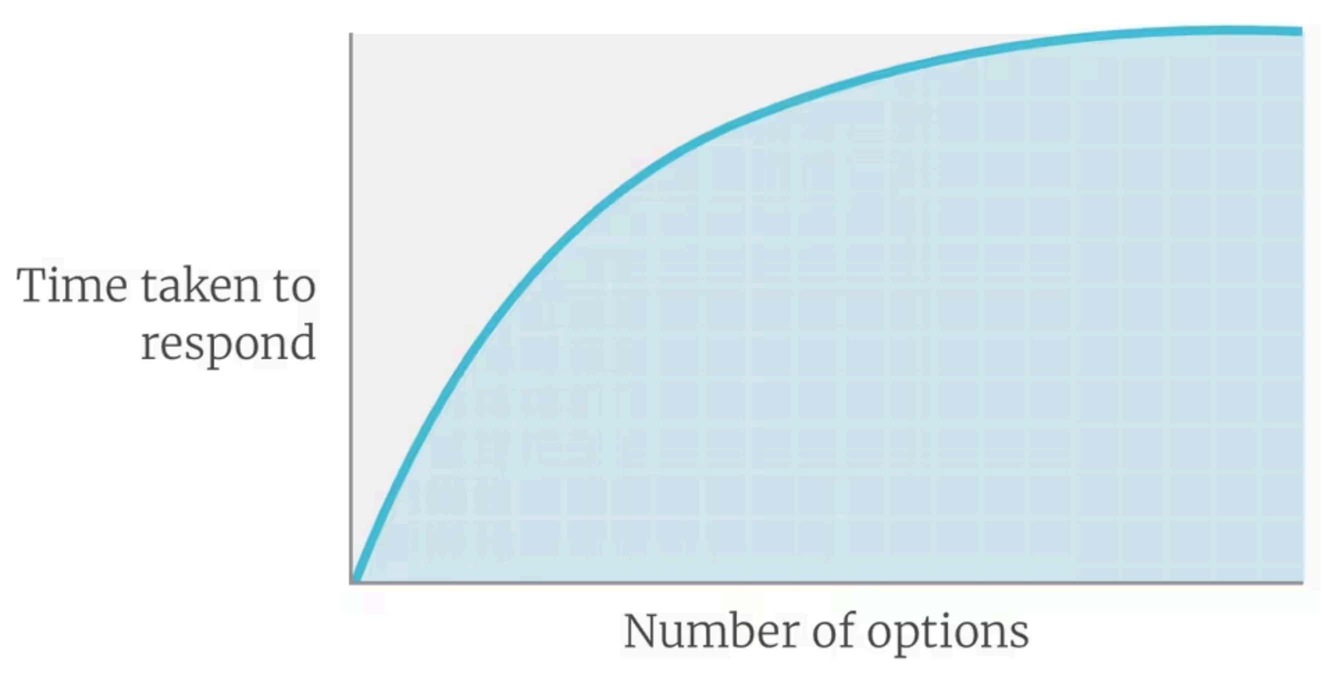
[1] Medium - User Control and Freedom: Empowering Users in UX Design
[2] UX Psychology - Designing for Autonomy: Balancing
[3] Nielsen Norman Group - Ten Usability Heuristics
[4] TechRxiv - AI-Driven Filtering Research
[5] Masaar - Echo Chambers and Recommendation Algorithms
[6] Department of Computer Science - The Hidden Cost of Netflix's . Autoplay
[7] Pennsylvania State University - User Control of Autoplay
[8] UserTesting - The Paradox of Choice in UX Design
[9] Nielsen Norman Group - Simplicity vs Choice
[10] UX Magazine - Designing Serendipity
[11] IJ Design - Digital Serendipity Research
[12] ResearchGate - Researching Serendipity in Digital Information Environments
[13] ACM Digital Library - Autonomous Driving Interfaces Study
[14] arXiv - Recommender Systems Research
[15] Nielsen Norman Group - UX Research Methods
[16] Nielsen Norman Group - UX Research Methods
[17] 7WData - How Spotify Uses Data Analytics
[18] Medium - The Inner Workings of Spotify's AI-Powered Music Recommendations
[19] Nielsen Norman Group - Ten Usability Heuristics

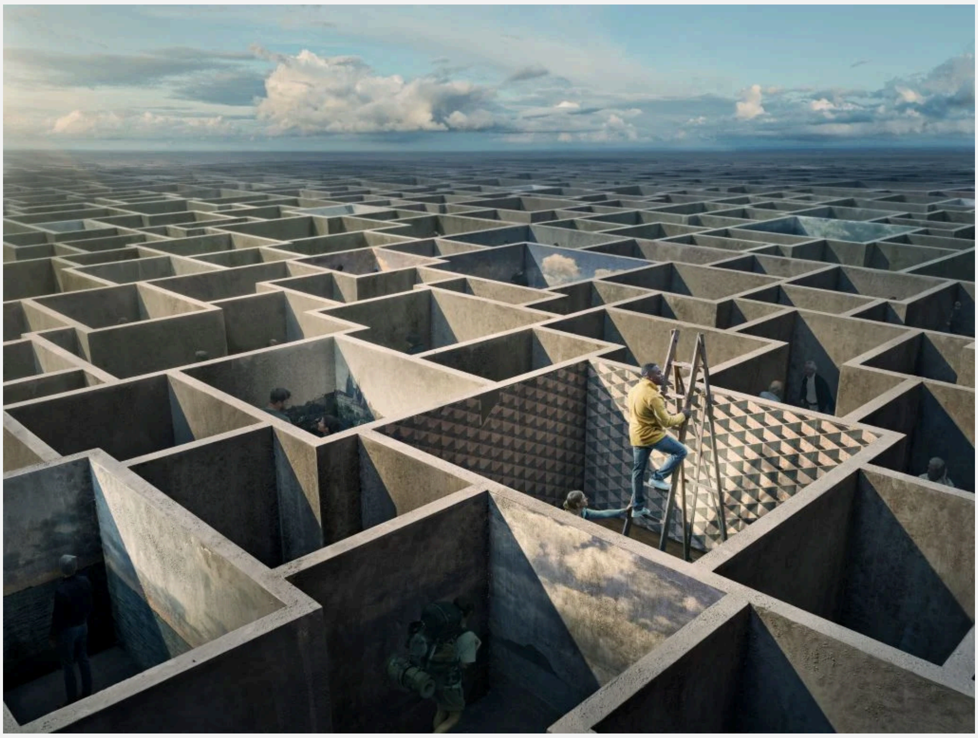
Hicks Law shows us that the more choices we offer a user, the longer it will take for them to decide, so increasing the chance they abandon the site.



07

The Echo Chamber by Swedish artist Erik Johansson.

In his work, he explores how we perceive the world around us and plays with the idea of what may happen if we dare to look beyond the edge of our own echo chambers and burst the filter bubbles around us.



The Questions

We're exploring eight guiding ideas that could reshape how people discover and connect with music—ideas that aim to make interfaces feel more human, discovery more meaningful, and listening more shared.

1. How do recommendations shape a listener's sense of control?

When music is served up based on past behavior, do people still feel like they're choosing—or just following? We're investigating how algorithmic suggestions can support, not override, personal agency.

2. Can offering a visible manual choice increase trust?

When users are given a clear option to pick for themselves—like a "Let me decide" button—does it make the experience feel more transparent, more respectful, and more theirs?

3. Can location-based features help people discover music more deeply?

If music is rooted in place, can listeners build stronger connections by exploring scenes tied to specific cities, regions, or cultural hubs—especially those outside algorithmic mainstreams?

4. How does context affect music discovery?

Does factoring in things like mood, time, or activity—rather than just listening history—make music feel more relevant and emotionally resonant?

5. Do shared listening spaces make people more engaged?

When listeners can tune into music together in real time—whether with friends or strangers—does it make them more present, more reactive, and more emotionally involved?

6. What design choices best support collaborative discovery?

Which interface tools—like shared queues, reactions, or light chat—help listeners explore music together without it becoming chaotic or overwhelming?

7. Do mystery features open the door to new sounds?

Can a bit of intentional surprise—a mystery track, a random pick—gently push people out of their habits and into something new, without feeling forced?

8. What's the best way to measure meaningful discovery?

Beyond play counts and skips, how can we tell when a song truly landed? Is it in how long someone listens, how they describe it later, or how much they remember it?

Algorithmic Experience (AX) & Aesthetics

09

Internalizing Recommendation Engines

Recommendation engines don't just offer choices; they embed social and normative cues that shift our internal question from "Do I like this?" to "Should I like this?" As social creatures, we look to others for guidance in ambiguous situations, a phenomenon known as social proof [1]. Platforms highlight metrics like star ratings, review counts and "Trending in your network" labels to signal consensus and popularity, turning recommendations into subtle commands rather than neutral suggestions [2]. When a song is tagged "Top hits among friends," it taps into the idea that if others enjoy it, you ought to as well, nudging you toward conformity [3]. Even a simple badge like "Staff pick" or "Critics' choice" carries authority influence, making you question whether professional endorsement means you should like something [4]. Position bias—placing certain items at the top of a list—reinforces the perception that the first option is the correct or recommended one, shifting your thought process from personal preference to expected preference [5].

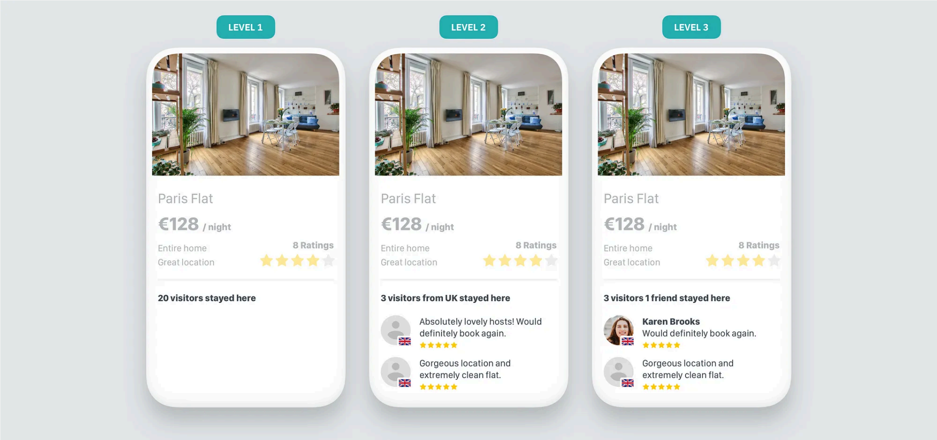
Psychologically, recommendation systems blend informational and normative influence to guide behavior. Informational influence arises when we assume the crowd knows something we don't, so we follow collective judgment as if it were superior [1]. Normative influence compels us to fit in with group expectations, even if our initial gut reaction differs [3]. Solomon Asch's classic conformity experiments showed that individuals will often abandon their own perceptions to align with a unanimous majority, revealing how powerful group pressure can be [6]. In online settings, seeing "1,000 users bought this" or "4.8-star average" exploits the same urge to conform, causing us to second-guess our own tastes in favor of perceived social approval [2]. Studies in restaurant recommendation websites demonstrate that bandwagon cues like ratings and reviews significantly sway consumers toward popular choices, even when those choices conflict with prior preferences [2].

User interface design magnifies these normative effects through defaults and curated highlights. Pre-selected filters, "Recommended for you" carousels and editor's picks act as default endorsements that users often accept without question [4]. Highlighting popularity through color, icons or placement gives the impression that the system itself recommends conformity, steering users away from independent selection [7]. Scarcity cues such as "Only 2 left" or "Limited time offer" add urgency, suggesting not only that you should like something, but that you must act now to belong to an exclusive group. Integration of friends' names—"Your friend Anna watched this"—leverages personal networks to reinforce normative pressure and heighten FOMO (fear of missing out) [8]. Even feedback prompts asking "Was this recommendation helpful?" prime users to align with the system's logic, reinforcing the sense that there is a correct answer to the question of preference [9].

Over time, these cues reshape how we experience choice and desire. What begins as a personal question—"Do I enjoy this movie or song?"—evolves into a normative dilemma—"Should I enjoy this because it's popular, expert-endorsed or trending among peers?" [5]. This shift can undermine true exploration by narrowing our exposure to items that fit the majority profile and reinforcing echo chambers of taste [2]. Users report moments of self-doubt, wondering if they genuinely like a fashion trend or are merely succumbing to algorithmic suggestion [10]. In consequence, individual agency erodes as personal curiosity gives way to algorithmically sanctioned norms, making us less likely to diverge from the suggested path [3].

To restore authentic choice, designers can rebalance guidance with agency. Offering a "chronological" or "no social cues" toggle removes popularity metrics and social labels, letting users ask, "Do I like this?" without external pressure [1]. Transparent explanations—"Recommended because you liked X, not because X is trending"—clarify the algorithm's rationale and remind users that suggestions are based on personal history, not universal mandate [4]. Preference sliders for freshness, diversity and popularity give control back to users, enabling them to decide which factors should influence recommendations [5]. Incorporating human-curated playlists, expert selections and randomized "mystery" picks reintroduces serendipity and challenges conformity by exposing users to choices outside the algorithm's comfort zone [8].

Ultimately, recommendation systems will shape internal questions as long as they deploy normative cues without counterbalance. By recognizing the power of social proof, authority signals and interface design to frame our preferences, we can advocate for interfaces that respect individual taste, promote genuine discovery and preserve autonomy. Next time you encounter a "Popular" label or a "Top picks for you" section, pause and ask, "Do I truly like this, or am I being told I should?"



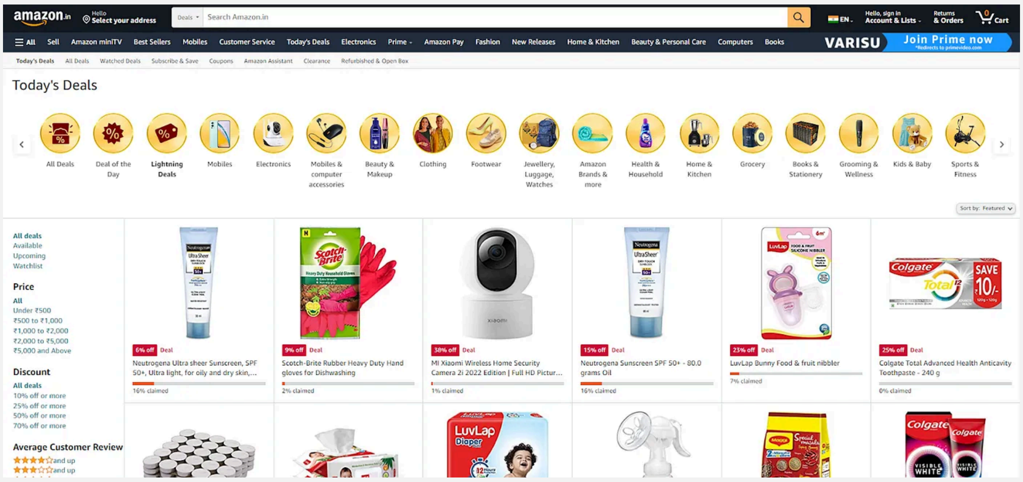
Absolutely lovely hosts! Would definitely book again.

Gorgeous location and extremely clean flat.

Would definitely book again.

Social proofing can happen on three levels: anonymous users, similar users, friends.

[1] The Decision Lab - "Social Proof"
[2] ScienceDirect - "Recommendation Systems and Consumer Behavior"
[3] PMC - "Social Influence in Online Environments"
[4] JAES Journals - "Interface Design and User Behavior"
[5] Oxford Academic - "Position Bias in Digital Choice Architecture"
[6] Verywell Mind - "The Asch Conformity Experiments"
[7] Pack Leader USA - "Product Labels and Buyer Behavior"
[8] PMC - "Social Networks and Digital Engagement"
[9] ResearchGate - "Recommender System Interfaces"
[10] The New Yorker - "How Norms Change"


amazon.in
Today's Deals
All Deals
Deal of the Day
Lightning Deals
Mobiles
Electronics
Mobiles & computer accessories
Beauty & Makeup
Clothing
Footwear
Jewellery, Luggage, Watches
Amazon Brands & more
Health & Household
Home & Kitchen
Grocery
Books & Stationery
Grooming & Wellness
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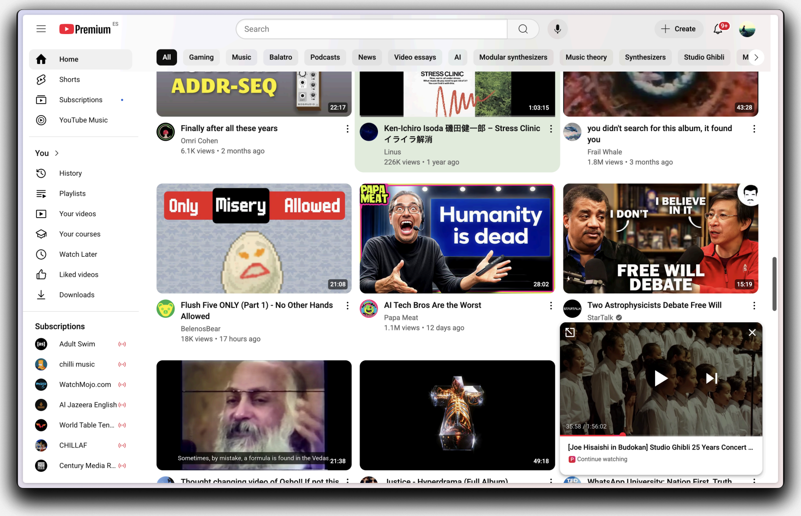
Join Prime now
Price
Discount
Average Customer Review

How many timers is too many timers?


Premium
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Create
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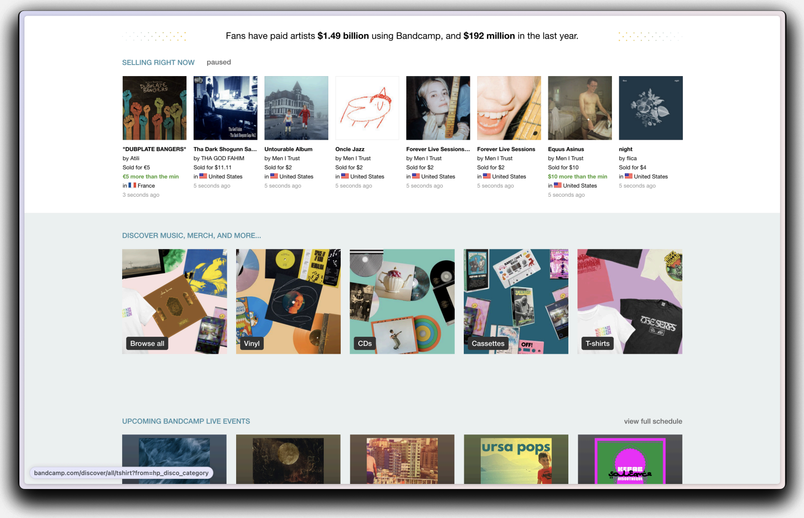
Balatro
Podcasts
News
Video essays
AI
Modular synthesizers
Music theory
Synthesizers
Studio Ghibli
Home
Shorts
Subscriptions
YouTube Music
You
History
Playlists
Your videos
Your courses
Watch Later
Liked videos
Downloads
Finally after all these years
Ken-Ichiro Isoda 磯田健一郎 – Stress Clinic イライラ解消
you didn't search for this album, it found you
Flush Five ONLY (Part 1) - No Other Hands Allowed
AI Tech Bros Are the Worst
Two Astrophysicists Debate Free Will
[Joe Hisaishi in Budokan] Studio Ghibli 25 Years Concert ...

Blocks of choices are arranged and presented infinitely.

Bandcamp


Fans have paid artists **$1.49 billion** using Bandcamp, and **$192 million** in the last year.

SELLING RIGHT NOW
paused
DISCOVER MUSIC, MERCH, AND MORE...
Browse all
Vinyl
CDs
Cassettes
T-shirts
UPCOMING BANDCAMP LIVE EVENTS
view full schedule
ursa pops

Scarcity and abundance exists parallely in the aesthetic of algorithmic recommendations.

Spotify as a Brand

Brand Values, UX philosophy and Visual Identity

When Discover Weekly rolled out in July 2015, it felt like someone had quietly slipped me a mixtape labeled "Just for You." I was on my way home from work when that two-hour playlist popped up at the top of my library—every Monday, fresh tracks tuned to my tastes. It wasn't magic, of course, but the result of months of data science, design thinking, and a mission that stretches back to Spotify's earliest days.[1]

Spotify's founders, Daniel Ek and Martin Lorentzon, launched the service in Stockholm in 2008 with one guiding promise: unlock the potential of human creativity by giving a million artists a living wage and billions of fans the chance to be moved by their work. That simple mission echoes through every feature, playlist, and program—whether it's a surprise "Release Radar" update every Friday or artist-funding initiatives unveiled at Investor Day 2022.[2]

Behind the scenes, that mission is rooted in five core values co-created by employees during what Spotify calls "The Passion Tour." In 2016, People & Culture teams crisscrossed global offices, inviting small groups of "band members" to workshop what it means to be innovative, passionate, collaborative, transparent, and fair. One session in New York filled a conference room with sticky notes and guitar riffs as employees argued over the best way to define "playful" in code reviews and team meetings. The result was a living band manifesto—more than words on a page, it's the lens through which every engineering sprint and marketing campaign is judged.[3]

That ethos extends into design as well. In June 2020, Spotify's product designers gathered in multi-time-zone video calls to boil six sprawling guidelines down to three clear north stars: Relevant, Human, and Unified. "Relevant" means delivering the right song at the right moment—like how Discover Weekly pulled that obscure B-side just when I was craving something new. "Human" underscores every quip in the interface, from playful nudges ("Psst... you've got new episodes!") to empathetic reminders ("We saved your spot"). And "Unified" ensures that mobile, desktop, car, and TV feel like parts of one seamless concert, not six different gigs.[4]

Take the story of Discover Weekly itself. In January 2015, Spotify hired Matt Ogle, a veteran of Last.fm and This Is My Jam, to build something that felt like a friend's mixtape. By July, it landed in front of 75 million users—and soon amassed five billion streams in its first ten months. Listeners called it "intimate" and "revelatory," marveling that an algorithm could strike the right balance between familiar favorites and exciting deep cuts. Within weeks, half of its users were saving tracks straight from their weekly playlist.[5]

Meanwhile, Release Radar debuted in August 2016, ensuring fans never miss a drop from artists they love. And on any given day, the UX team relies on personas—fictional characters like Rosa, a graphic designer winding down to acoustic tracks—to keep features grounded in real human routines. These personas aren't sterile abstractions; they're built from interviews and data, complete with backstories and color-coded traits, so every interaction feels less like one-size-fits-all and more like a thoughtful hand-picked recommendation.[6]

Balancing autonomy and alignment is another hallmark of Spotify's approach. In 2015, the GLUE team was formed to maintain consistency across dozens of indie squads, tribes, and guilds. And when design bugs slipped through, a global Design QA workshop in 2018 introduced "TUNE"—a checklist for Tone, Usability, Necessity, and Emotive quality—that ensures every feature not only works but feels unmistakably Spotify.[7]

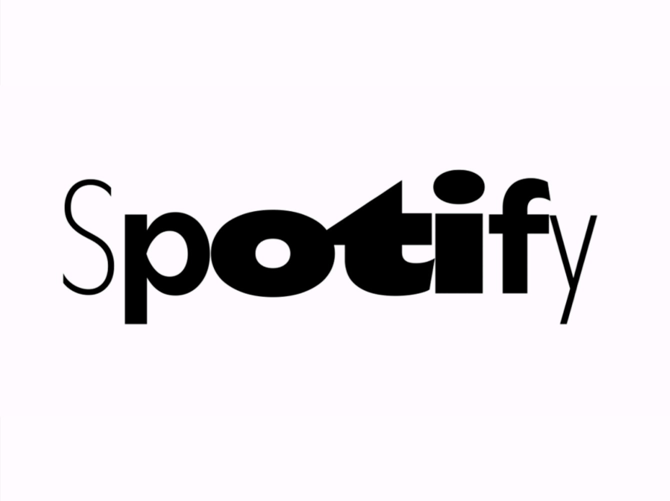
Visually, Spotify's brand is built around a deceptively simple toolkit. The lime-green circle and three curved lines suggest sound waves in motion, applied with strict clear-space rules so the logo always reads loud and clear—

whether on a subway billboard or a collaborator's keynote slide. The palette centers on "Spotify Green" paired with charcoal black and white, with vibrant accents of pink, yellow, and purple reserved for moments of celebration —like the neon bursts of Wrapped each December.[8]

Wrapped itself tells a story of visual identity in action. Since its debut in December 2016, this annual campaign has grown into a global phenomenon, boiling your year in music into vibrant graphics that users share on social media. What began as a modest "Year in Music" recap transformed into a full story-format experience by 2020, complete with quizzes, badges for podcast fandom, and celebrity-style filters. Wrapped is where data, design, and emotion collide—and it consistently boosts Spotify's app-store ranking and brand visibility every year.[9]

Typography has its own tale. For years, Spotify relied on a custom license of Circular, a clean geometric sans-serif by Dalton Maag. But in May 2024, the company unveiled Spotify Mix —a bespoke typeface co-created with Dinamo over 18 months. "Circular felt limiting," Spotify's global head of brand design explained. Mix's sharp angles and smooth curves give designers a richer voice, capable of expressing everything from a high-energy concert announcement to a relaxed, playlist-share invite.[10]

All these elements—values born in passion-tour workshops, UX principles forged in design jams, memorable product launches like Discover Weekly and Group Sessions, and an evolving visual system—come together to make Spotify more than a streaming app. It's a stage where creativity, technology, and human moments converge. Next time you see that green play button, or unwrap your annual Wrapped summary, remember: behind every pixel and playlist lies a story of thoughtful design, cultural ambition, and a band of builders determined to keep music at the heart of it all.[11]



In 2024 Spotify announced its own font, Spotify Mix. It was created in collaboration with Berlin-based type foundry Dinamo Typefaces. It replaced Circular in mobile and desktop app environments, and works with all languages that use Latin-based scripts. Variable fonts have been a hot topic in the brand design market recently.

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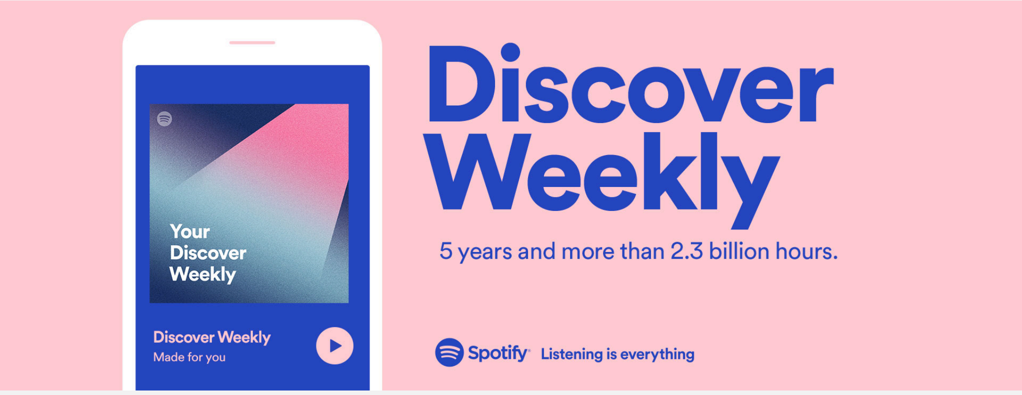
[1] TechCrunch: "Why Browse When You Can Play? Spotify's 'Discover Weekly' Playlist"
[2] Life at Spotify: "The Band Manifesto"
[3] HR Blog: "Spotify's Core Values" & "The Passion Tour: workshopping values the Spotify way"
[4] Spotify Design blog: "Introducing Spotify's New Design Principles"
[5] The Verge: "How Spotify's Discover Weekly Cracked Human Curation at Internet Scale"
[6] Medium (Spotify Design): "The Story of Spotify Personas"
[7] Marvel Blog: "Scaling Design at Spotify"
[8] Spotify for Developers: "Design & Branding Guidelines"
[9] Wikipedia: "Spotify Wrapped"
[10] Its Nice That: "Spotify launches new bespoke typeface with Dinamo: Spotify Mix"
[11] Spotify Newsroom: "Your squad can now stream simultaneously using Spotify's Group Session beta"

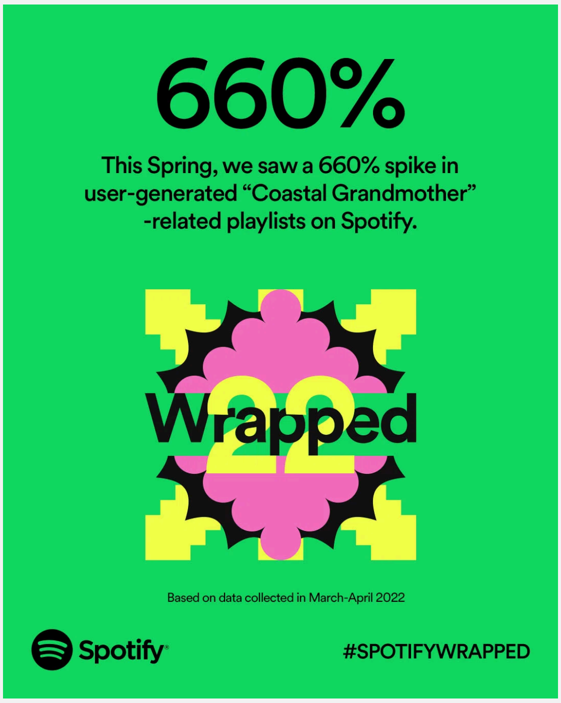
Symbol

Color #4CE076


Your
Discover
Weekly
Discover Weekly
Made for you
Discover Weekly
5 years and more than 2.3 billion hours.
Spotify
Listening is everything

In the five years since its launch, listeners have also streamed endless hours of the Discover Weekly playlist—over 2.3 billion hours between July 2015 and June 25, 2020 For the numerically inclined, that's more than:

8.4 trillion seconds
140 billion minutes
2.3 billion hours
97.3 million days
13.9 million weeks
266.5 thousand years


660%
Wrapped
22
Spotify
#SPOTIFYWRAPPED

This Spring, we saw a 660% spike in user-generated "Coastal Grandmother" -related playlists on Spotify.

Based on data collected in March-April 2022

One iteration of the 2022 Wrapped identity.

Features & Campaigns

Spotify's approach to campaigns has always doubled as a spotlight on its latest features, each rollout telling a story about where the service was headed—and how listeners and creators were meant to engage. Here's how some of the most memorable Spotify campaigns dovetailed with key feature launches, shaping both the platform's growth and its cultural footprint.

It began in 2012, when Spotify opened the door to social listening with its embeddable Play Button, Web Player, and Follow tab—all announced at a press event where CEO Daniel Ek acknowledged that "Spotify is great when you know what to play, but not when you don't." That moment set the stage for campaigns that weren't just about ads but about teaching users to expect discovery by default [1].

Fast-forward to May 2015: Spotify unveiled "Spotify Running," matching tracks to your tempo, and a redesigned Home page primed for personalized recommendations. The accompanying marketing push framed Spotify as an active companion—not merely a library but a coach for every workout. Runners shared stats on Strava and Instagram, organically amplifying the feature's promise of effortless pacing [1].

Two months later, Discover Weekly debuted without fanfare—and then exploded in popularity. Spotify quietly published a support post explaining how "listeners have streamed over 2.3 billion hours" of their personalized mixes, and let users spread the word with share buttons built right into the playlist itself [2]. The campaign wasn't about billboards; it was woven into the user journey, turning every saved track into a recommendation engine.

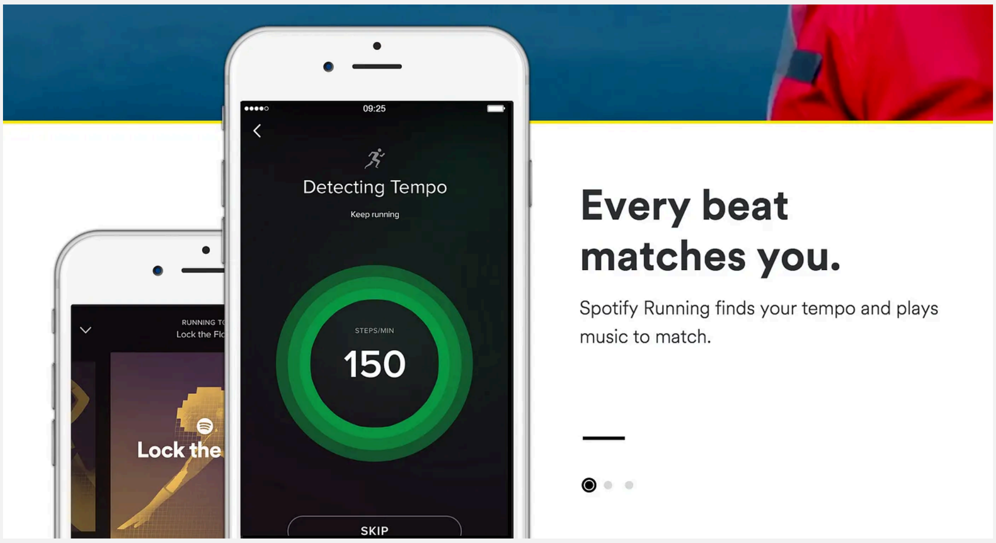
In August 2016, Release Radar joined the lineup, delivering new drops every Friday. Spotify's artist-focused campaigns showed musicians how pitching a song could get it into fans' weekly feeds, complete with tutorial videos and dashboard highlights in Spotify for Artists [3]. By pitching a release just seven days before launch, teams could trigger automatic inclusion—transforming promotional timelines across the industry [4]. That autumn also saw the rebirth of Spotify Wrapped. What began as a modest "Year in Music" recap was rebranded in December 2016 as "Wrapped," accompanied by a campaign touting the "Your Top Songs" playlist [5]. The promotional materials—playful graphics plastered across social feeds—made Wrapped an annual must-share moment. A parallel "Thanks 2016, it's been weird" billboard series riffed on users' quirky stats, proving that data-driven insight could double as clever advertising [6].

By 2019, Wrapped lived inside the app. No longer confined to a microsite, it boasted immersive storytelling and shareable cards, reinforcing self-discovery and social proof at the moment you opened Spotify each December [5].

As podcasts surged, Spotify launched "Music, Meet Podcasts" in September 2020, a global campaign demonstrating how music and spoken-word content coexisted on one platform [7]. Ads showed everyday moments—commutes, workouts—underscored by both tracks and episodes, signaling Spotify's shift from music library to holistic audio hub.

That July, "Your Squad Can Now Stream Simultaneously" introduced Group Sessions, complete with a Newsroom post and visual guides on how friends could co-listen from anywhere [8]. The campaign leaned on social proof again: users posted screenshots of synchronized queues, turning a beta test into an aspiration for remote listening parties.

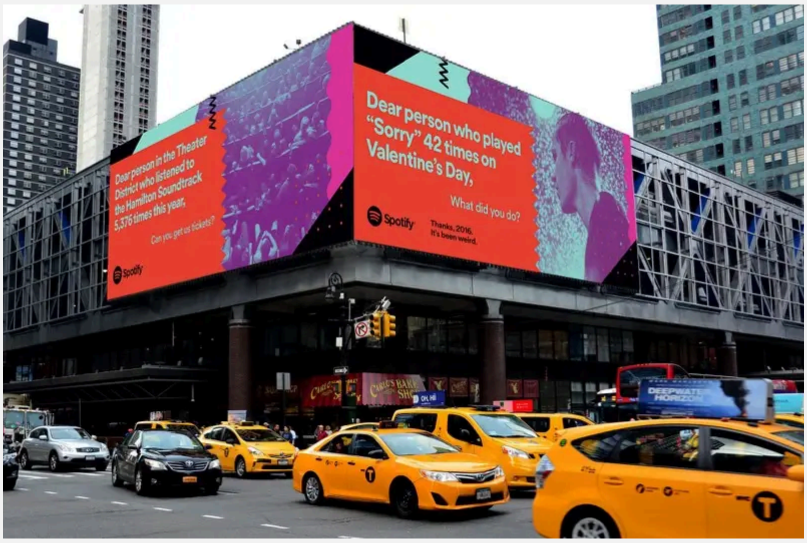
In early 2021, Spotify streamed live audio with Greenroom. The TechCrunch announcement highlighted features like real-time rooms and podcast conversion, and Spotify seeded blog posts and creator toolkits to onboard artists and hosts [9]. A year later, Greenroom became Spotify Live, folding live-audio into the main app and extending its reach to all 406 million listeners.


09:25
Detecting Tempo
Keep running
STEPS/MIN
150
SKIP
RUNNING T
Lock the Fl
Lock the

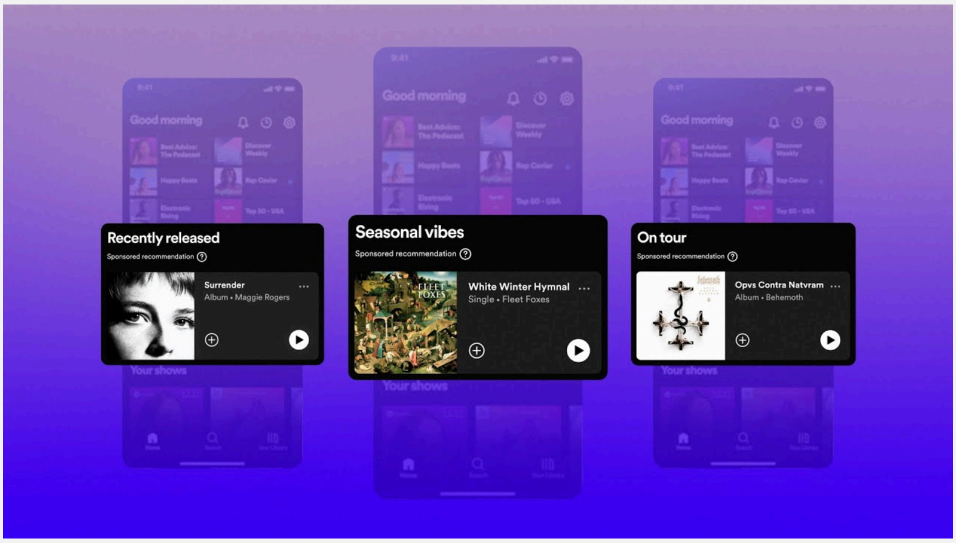
Every beat matches you.

Spotify Running finds your tempo and plays music to match.

As you start your run, Spotify Running (Discontinued) detects your running cadence, which it maps to the tempo of its playlists. I clocked in at 160 BPM and started out with their Epic playlist.


Dear person in the Theater District who listened to the Hamilton Soundtrack 5,376 times this year,
Can you get us tickets?
Spotify
Dear person who played "Sorry" 42 times on Valentine's Day,
What did you do?
Spotify
Thanks, 2016. It's been weird.

Spotify's chief marketing officer, Seth Farbman, told Creativity, "There has been some debate about whether big data is muting creativity in marketing, but we have turned that on its head," adding, "For us, data inspires and gives an insight into the emotion that people are expressing." (Business Insider, 2016)


Good morning
Recently released
Sponsored recommendation
Surrender
Album • Maggie Rogers
Seasonal vibes
Sponsored recommendation
White Winter Hymnal
Single • Fleet Foxes
On tour
Sponsored recommendation
Opvs Contra Natvram
Album • Behemoth
Your shows

Showcase is our newest tool made for marketing music. It gives you and your team more flexibility when it comes to promoting the releases you want, when you want, to the listeners you want to reach – right on Spotify's Home (artists.spotify.com)

Behind the scenes, Spotify for Artists was gaining its own marketing muscle. In February 2021, Marquee ads moved from invite-only to self-serve, backed by a campaign promising "twice as likely to save" performance and easy booking in the dashboard [10]. Alongside that, Discovery Mode began beta testing, assuring labels that select tracks could be algorithmically prioritized at no upfront buy-in. Canvas—those looping visuals under each song—went from pilot to universal, wrapped in tutorials and artist success stories to drive adoption.

Most recently, in September 2023, Showcase launched as a new home-feed promotional tool. Spotify pushed case studies showing a sixfold increase in streams for promoted releases, and rolled out a campaign checklist via the Ads Help Center to encourage timely and measurable campaigns [11]. This focus on artist-centric advertising marked a shift from consumer-facing stunts to ROI-driven feature marketing.

Throughout this timeline, Spotify's campaigns have served two purposes: introducing features and narrating why they matter. From coaching runners with tempo-matched playlists to making annual retrospectives a social ritual, each campaign has been stitched into the product experience. That alignment—campaign message meeting feature promise—helped Spotify grow from a music library into a multi-dimensional audio stage.

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[1] "Spotify," Wikipedia – April 2012 features; May 2015 Home page & Running launch

[2] "Five years of discovery and engagement through Discover Weekly, "Spotify Ads Newsroom, June 2020

[3] "Getting music on Release Radar," Spotify Support

[4] Reddit discussion on Release Radar pitch timing, r/musicmarketing, 2023

[5] "We're Commemorating a Decade of Spotify Wrapped With Our Best, "Spotify Newsroom, December 2024

[6] "Case Study: Spotify 'Thanks 2016, it's been weird'," VETO Blog, November 2016

[7] "Spotify's New 'Music, Meet Podcasts' Campaign Inspires Fans to Use the Power of Audio," Spotify Newsroom, September 2020

[8] "Your squad can now stream simultaneously using Spotify's Group Session beta," Spotify Newsroom, July 2020

[9] "Spotify launches its live audio app and Clubhouse rival Spotify Greenroom," TechCrunch, June 2021

[10] "Spotify announces beta launch of audience development tool for artists, self-serve 'Marquee' ads," TechCrunch, February 2021

[11] "Getting started with Showcase: A Campaign Tool to Give Your Music Its Moment on Home," Spotify for Artists blog, September 2023

Inside the Algo-engine

When Discover Weekly arrived on July 6, 2015, it didn't just bring a new playlist—it felt like someone at Spotify had peeked into my music mind and slipped me a hand-picked mixtape every Monday. That magic was engineered by a team led by Edward Newett, who combined user-listening patterns with millions of playlist data points to uncover hidden connections between artists and listeners. Within a year, Discover Weekly racked up nearly five billion streams as users marveled that the algorithm could balance beloved favorites with deep cuts just for them [1].

Behind that moment stood a strategic turning point in March 2014: Spotify's €50 million acquisition of The Echo Nest, a music-analytics company spun out of MIT Media Lab research. Tristan Jehan and Brian Whitman had built technology that "listened" to raw audio—quantifying attributes like danceability, energy, and valence—and scoured web data for contextual clues about genre, mood, and era. Once folded into Spotify's infrastructure, those audio features formed a rich content backbone, allowing every track across its 40 million-song catalog to be profiled in granular detail [2, 3].

But raw audio is only one layer. At its core, Spotify leans heavily on collaborative filtering, a technique perfected when user A's tastes closely mirror user B's. In practice, the system maintains massive "taste profiles" for each subscriber, tracking listening history, playlist adds, skip behavior, and follows. By finding clusters of users with overlapping preferences, the algorithm can recommend songs that peers with similar profiles have saved or streamed repeatedly. Spotify actually combines two flavors—user-based filtering (recommending what people like you enjoy) and item-based filtering (identifying songs similar to the ones you already love)—into a hybrid approach that leverages the strengths of both methods [4, 5].

Content-based methods bolster this with another data stream: deep analysis of track metadata and natural language processing of editorial content. Every time an artist submits a song, they tag it with genres, subgenres, and moods. Spotify's internal "Truffle Pig" tool lets music editors query for adjectives—"laid-back," "upbeat," "angst-ridden"—drawing from both these artist-provided tags and algorithm-derived features. Alongside play counts and library saves, those descriptors feed into supervised models that recognize patterns like "songs with a mellow acoustic intro followed by an emotional chorus tend to be saved by relaxation-seeking listeners" [6, 3].

Orchestrating all these signals is a sophisticated recommender ensemble. Spotify's public recruits call it "a dozen recommender systems," each optimized for a specific use case—Discover Weekly, Release Radar, Daily Mixes, and the Home Screen's "Made for You" section. Stratoflow's breakdown describes how collaborative, content-based, and audio-analysis models are weighted differently depending on context: a "fresh finds" playlist might lean into recent releases from followed artists, while a genre-deep-dive blend balances popularity with novelty to keep the listening session from going stale [7].

Context matters too. Music Tomorrow's deep dive shows that Spotify segments listening into distinct sessions—"what's new," "focus," "workout," "commute"—and interprets skip signals differently across them. Skipping a track during a "What's New" session isn't a hard "dislike," but part of the exploration process; the algorithm logs that nuance to refine future recommendations. That split between explicit feedback (saves, shares, thumbs up) and implicit feedback (session length, repeat listens, skip timing) lets Spotify build a multi-dimensional picture of what listeners value in each moment [8].

Release Radar, introduced in August 2016, showcases artist-follow data. Every Friday, it surfaces newly dropped tracks by artists you follow or have recently interacted with, interwoven with suggestions for newcomers that algorithmically resemble your tastes. It's less about deep personalization and more about keeping fans connected to their favorite creators, balancing loyalty with discovery. Spotify's "Understanding Recommendations" page even notes that algorithmic trends across the platform influence individual suggestions—so global surges in an emerging indie act can bump their song into your weekly radar if you've shown any past interest in similar sounds [9].

Under the hood, all these models run on a real-time data pipeline, continuously ingesting play events, skip data, playlist edits, and social interactions. Machine-learning engineers retrain models nightly with fresh data, while feature-store teams curate and version audio-analysis metrics and metadata. For new tracks with little user history, cold-start challenges arise—but Spotify mitigates them with content-based wildcards: hand-picked editorial playlists and audio fingerprinting that slot brand-new songs into existing genre clusters until enough user feedback accumulates [3].

Looking ahead, Spotify is weaving in deep neural embeddings to capture even more subtle relationships—mapping songs, artists, and even listening sessions into a shared high-dimensional space where proximity means shared attributes or contexts. This "taste embedding" approach, paired with reinforcement-learning experiments, aims to optimize not just for immediate engagement (a save or complete play) but for long-term satisfaction: will you return next week craving more of what you find here? It's the next frontier in Spotify's quest to make every listener feel uniquely understood.

When you tap into a personalized playlist today—whether it's the comforting warmth of a Daily Mix or the thrill of a freshly minted Discover Weekly—you're hearing the result of years of data-science craftsmanship: Echo Nest's audio-analysis roots, collaborative filtering's collective wisdom, content-based nuance, and a real-time feedback loop that learns from every swipe. This confluence of techniques has set Spotify's recommendations apart and keeps raising the bar for what it means to discover music in the streaming era.

The Echo Nest is a music intelligence and data platform for developers and media companies. Owned by Spotify since 2014, the company is based in Somerville, MA. The Echo Nest began as a research spin-off from the MIT Media Lab to understand the audio and textual content of recorded music. Its creators intended it to perform music identification, recommendation, playlist creation, audio fingerprinting, and analysis for consumers and developers.

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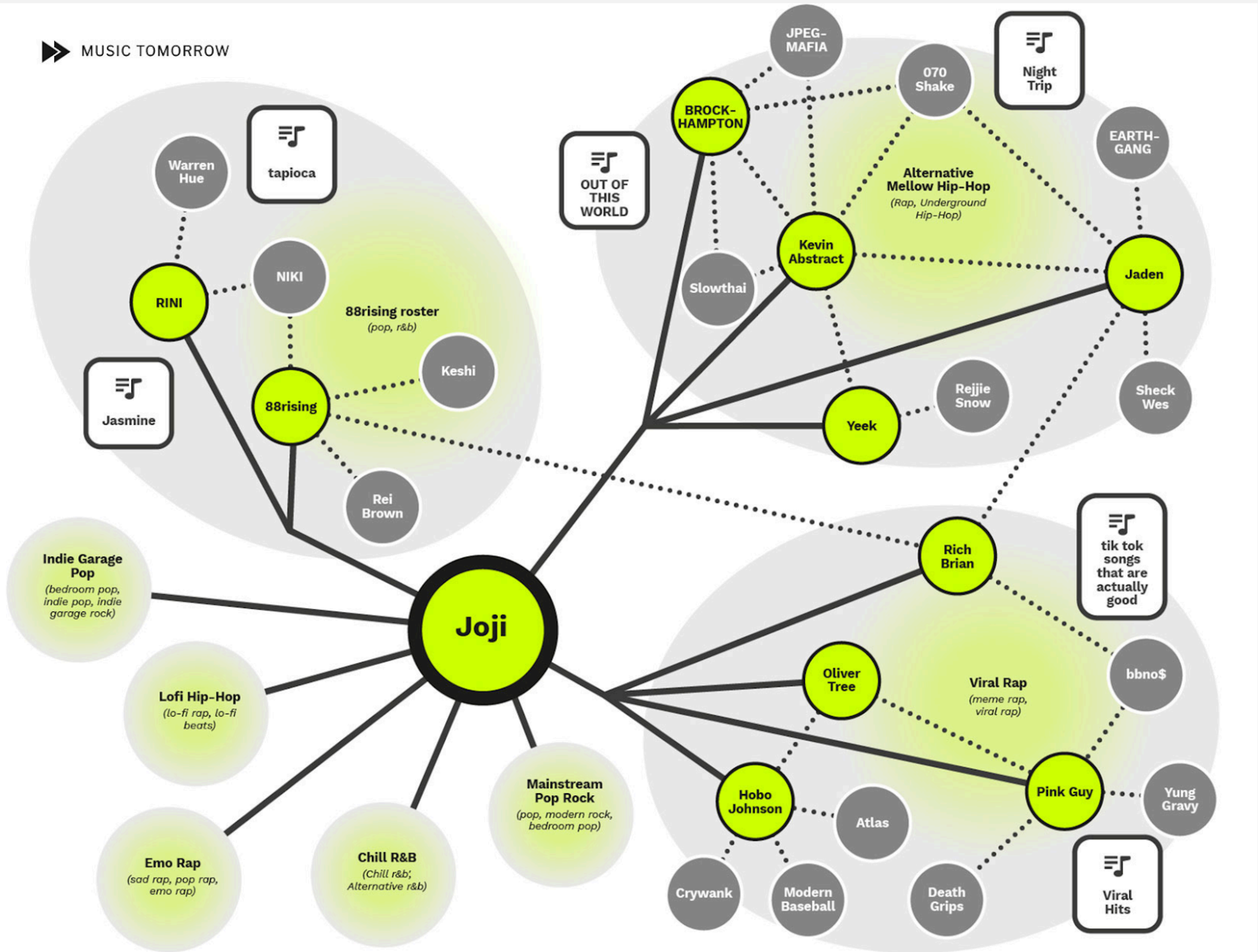
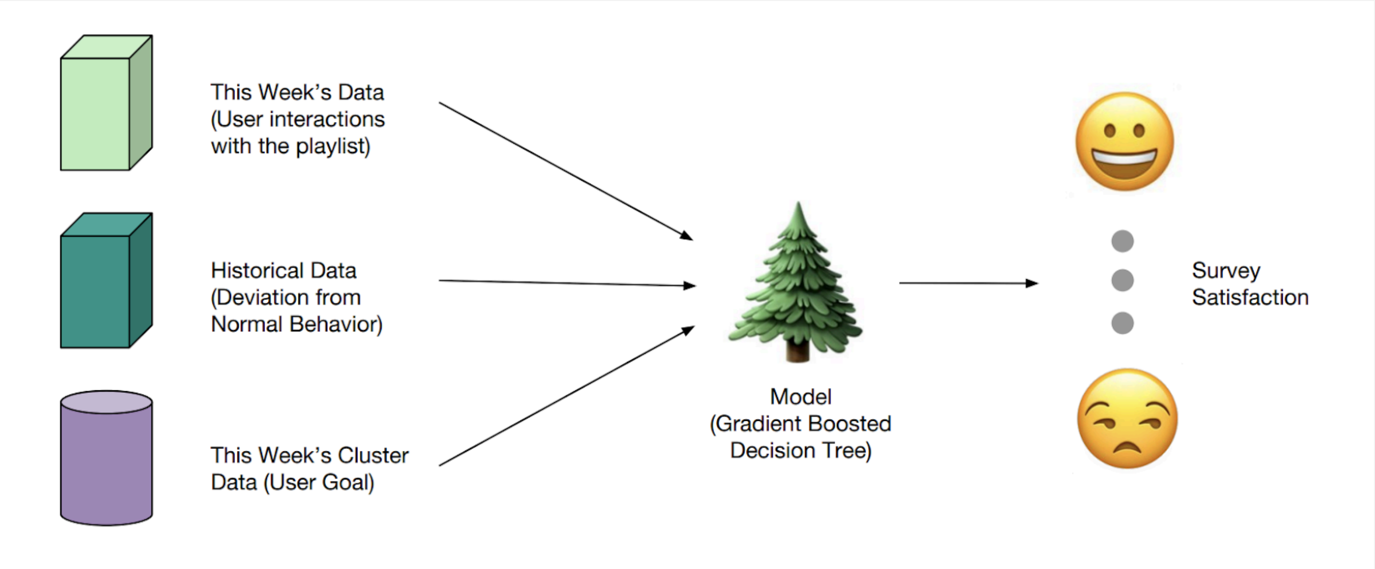
[1] WIRED: "How Spotify chooses what makes it onto your Discover Weekly playlist"
[2] Wikipedia: "Spotify Acquires The Echo Nest"
[3] Medium (Beyond the Build): "The Inner Workings of Spotify's AI Powered Music Recommendations"
[4] USC Viterbi Engineering: "Algorithmic Symphonies: How Spotify Strikes the Right Chord"
[5] Wikipedia: "Collaborative filtering"
[6] LANDR Blog: "How does Spotify's algorithm analyze your music?"
[7] Stratoflow: "Spotify Recommendation Algorithm: What's The Secret to Its Success?"
[8] Music Tomorrow: "A Complete Guide to Spotify Recommendation Algorithms"
[9] Spotify: "Understanding recommendations on Spotify"


MUSIC TOMORROW
Warren Hue
tapioca
RINI
NIKI
88rising roster
(pop, r&b)
Keshi
88rising
Rei Brown
Jasmine
Indie Garage Pop
(bedroom pop, indie pop, indie garage rock)
Lofi Hip-Hop
(lo-fi rap, lo-fi beats)
Emo Rap
(sad rap, pop rap, emo rap)
Chill R&B
(Chill r&b; Alternative r&b)
Mainstream Pop Rock
(pop, modern rock, bedroom pop)
Joji
OUT OF THIS WORLD
JPEG-MAFIA
BROCK-HAMPTON
070 Shake
Night Trip
EARTH-GANG
Alternative Mellow Hip-Hop
(Rap, Underground Hip-Hop)
Kevin Abstract
Slowthai
Jaden
Yeek
Rejjie Snow
Sheck Wes
Rich Brian
tik tok songs that are actually good
Oliver Tree
Viral Rap
(meme rap, viral rap)
bbno$
Hobo Johnson
Atlas
Pink Guy
Yung Gravy
Crywank
Modern Baseball
Death Grips
Viral Hits

How can artists influence the Spotify's algorithm.

Here you can see how different genre, listener groups, virality and music scenes affect the rise of a mainstream artist 'Joji'.


This Week's Data (User interactions with the playlist)
Historical Data (Deviation from Normal Behavior)
This Week's Cluster Data (User Goal)
Model (Gradient Boosted Decision Tree)
Survey Satisfaction

How the three parts of the algorithm recommendations present a spectrum of likability.

Spotify Dark Mode

Last December's Spotify Wrapped landed like a hangover instead of a celebration. Fans who once rushed to share their annual music stories instead took to social media to mock the late rollout, meager genre stats, and that awkward AI-generated "podcast" segment. On TikTok and X, #WrappedFail trended as users called this year's recap "soul-destroying" and "lazy," noting that features like Sound Towns and top-album rankings, staples since 2016, were conspicuously absent [1,2]. What felt like a heartfelt yearly tradition now reads like a cost-cutting exercise—and that creeping sense of cynicism extends far beyond Wrapped.

Back in July 2024, The Guardian detailed how Spotify's "Discovery Mode" quietly lets artists trade a slice of their royalties for algorithmic promotion—a modern payola that tilts the playing field toward labels with deep pockets and leaves indie acts scrambling [3]. Critics from the Recording Academy branded it "predatory," and a viral Reddit thread exposed how tracks flagged for Discovery Mode crowd out organic discoveries, eroding listener trust [4,5]. If Spotify once stood as a champion of emerging voices, it now risks being seen as a corporate gatekeeper, boosting whoever pays to play.

The company's 2024 layoffs loomed in the background of these controversies. After trimming roughly 17 percent of its workforce in mid-2024, Spotify touted higher profit margins—but engineers tell industry outlets that the cuts hollowed out key design and analytics teams [6]. The same CJR feature noted that reliance on Google's NotebookLM for AI-generated audio summaries showed signs of desperation: leadership was leaning on generative tools to fill gaps left by departing staff. Wrapped's clumsy AI podcast, powered by Google's Gemini model, felt less like an experiment and more like a placeholder for genuine creativity.

Meanwhile, the app itself has grown unwieldy. Long-time users on Spotify's own community forums and on Hacker News describe the desktop interface as "cluttered" and "counterintuitive," a far cry from the sleek experience that fueled early word-of-mouth growth [7,8]. Every scroll seems to reveal yet another sidebar—concert tickets, newsletter sign-ups, audiobook previews—until simple actions like saving a song or editing a playlist require a small expedition. Some power users have drifted back to Apple Music simply to escape the chaos of too many features fighting for their attention [9].

Spotify's rapid feature expansion—once a badge of innovation—now looks like overreach. Amazon Music and Apple Music have replicated core discovery tools with clearer artist-payout terms, and niche services like Qobuz and Tidal are wooing audiophiles and artists alike with higher-fidelity streams and more transparent royalty models [9]. As Spotify's brand promise of fair artist compensation frays, competitors are framing themselves as the ethical alternative, leaving Spotify's green circle to feel like a default choice rather than an inspired one.

Even on the numbers front, the shine has dulled. In Q1 2025, Spotify reported 689 million monthly active users and €4.19 billion in revenue—solid on the surface, but a stark slowdown from the 51 percent subscriber surge of early 2024 [10]. Year-over-year growth slipped to 11 percent, a sign that Spotify's momentum may be sputtering. Investor confidence hinges on storytelling as much as subscriber counts, and the narrative of relentless expansion is losing its luster.

A separate study by Business Insider found that while Spotify remains a top social-media mention thanks to Wrapped, its earned-media value grew just 12 percent compared to Netflix's 103 percent boost on TikTok and Adidas's viral campaigns [11]. Worse yet, the chatter around Wrapped is now dominated by snark and disillusionment—memes lampooning AI misfires, think pieces on algorithmic exploitation, and parodies ripping off "Unwrapped" royalty data. When a brand's marquee event becomes its biggest critique, the warning signs are flashing.

Artist backlash has become increasingly public. In late 2024, a parody site called "Spotify Unwrapped" went viral by exposing how little top artists actually earn per stream, forcing Spotify into a transparent-for-once legal battle to take it down [12]. Around the same time, Spotify quietly instituted a 1,000-plays-per-year threshold before tracks accrue royalties—a move that effectively silences niche creators locked out of the mainstream [13]. These policies undercut the founding pledge to give "a million artists the opportunity to live off their art."

STOP
FIGHTING
ARTIST
#JUSTICEATSPOTIFY

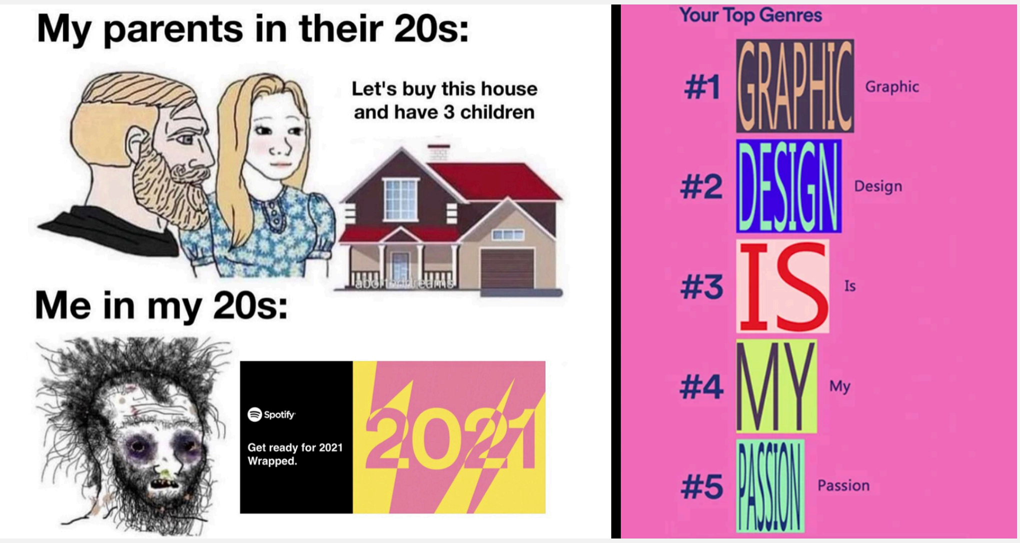
The Union of Musicians and Allied Workers' "Justice at Spotify" campaign mobilized workers in 31 cities around the world.

Against this backdrop, Spotify's brand identity feels bruised. The vivid neon bursts of Wrapped posters now look like laundry detergent racks—same shape, different flavor—with little creative spark. The iconic green-and-black palette still pops, but the glyph of the three curved lines no longer draws fans into a promise of discovery; it often means yet another playlist pushed by undisclosed paid placement. Spotify's carefully choreographed visual system, once the stage for musical surprises, has become a backdrop to friction and frustration.

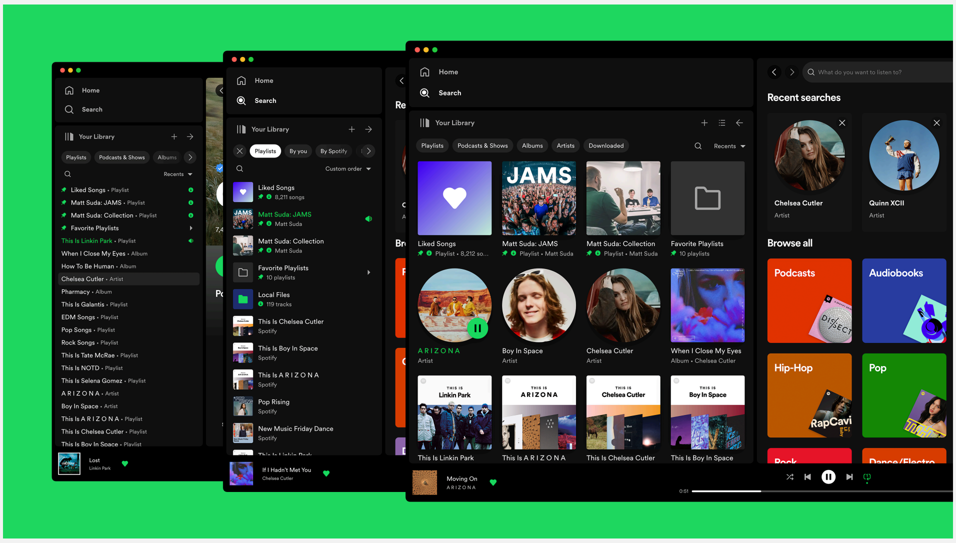
What happens next will determine whether Spotify survives as a cultural juggernaut or fades into background noise. The company must reckon with its own contradictions: championing creativity while squeezing artist pay, promising personalized discovery while trading authenticity for AI shortcuts. Restoring trust will require more than cosmetic UX tweaks or fresh color accents. It demands transparent royalty structures, a rollback of pay-for-play programs, and a recommitment to the human-driven curation that first set Spotify apart.

Reclaiming brand value isn't just about tweaking Wrapped; it's about untangling the experience so artists and listeners feel they're back in the same band, not stuck in a corporate labyrinth. If Spotify stays true to its original vision—unlocking creativity and connecting fans and creators—it can rebuild its reputation. But if it continues down the path of churn-and-burn features, opaque payouts, and AI crutches, the green circle risks becoming just another icon on a crowded screen, forgotten once the competition hits its stride.

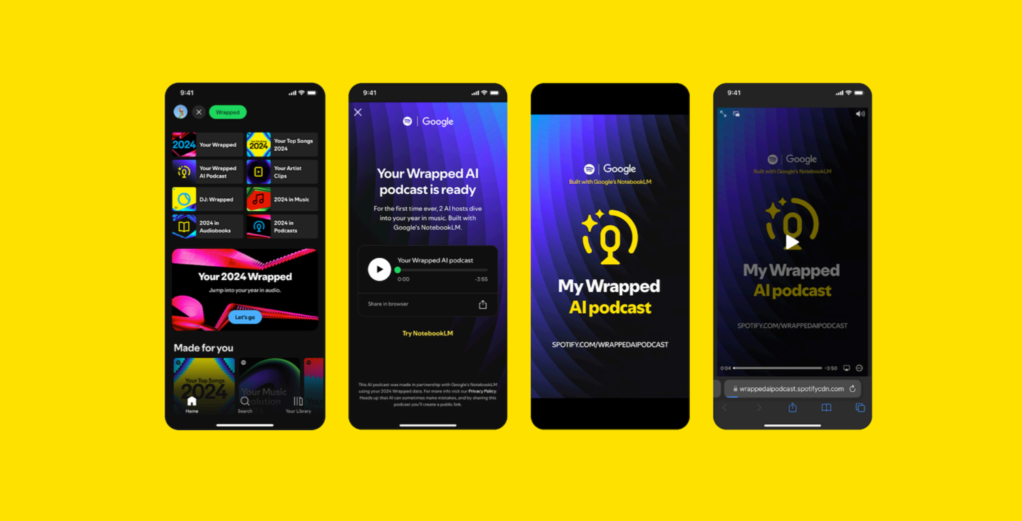
[1] Forbes (Dec 5, 2024): "Spotify users slam 'worst' Wrapped after long wait and lack of genre, album statistics"
[2] Adweek (Dec 4, 2024): "Spotify is the Latest Brand Facing AI Backlash Over Wrapped Campaign"
[3] The Guardian (Jul 29, 2024): "The music industry is engineering artist popularity – listeners are right to be angry"
[4] Recording Academy: "Does Spotify's New 'Discovery Mode' Resemble Anti-Creator Payola?"
[5] Reddit (Dec 2024): Thread about Spotify's discovery features
[6] Columbia Journalism Review (Dec 2024): "Spotify's Bad Wrap"
[7] Spotify Community Forum: Various threads about UI clutter
[8] Hacker News (2024): Threads criticizing the new Spotify desktop UI
[9] The Music Essentials (2024): "Amazon and Apple Are Beating Spotify at Its Own Game"
[10] Reuters (Apr 2025): "Spotify forecasts subscribers, revenue"
[11] Business Insider (Feb 2025): "The brands dominating with influencers"
[12] NME (Nov 2024): "'Spotify Unwrapped' parody site taken down"
[13] Reddit (Dec 2024): Thread about Spotify's royalty threshold


My parents in their 20s:
Let's buy this house and have 3 children
Me in my 20s:
Spotify
Get ready for 2021 Wrapped.
2021
Your Top Genres
#1 GRAPHIC Graphic
#2 DESIGN Design
#3 IS Is
#4 MY My
#5 PASSION Passion

This meme formats show sarcastic or disappointed reactions to 2024 Wrapped, echoing real user sentiment and virality.


Home
Search
Your Library
Playlists
Podcasts & Shows
Albums
Artists
Downloaded
Recents
Liked Songs
Matt Suda: JAMS
Matt Suda: Collection
Favorite Playlists
Recent searches
Chelsea Cutler
Quinn XCII
Browse all
Podcasts
Audiobooks
Hip-Hop
Pop
Moving On
ARIZONA

Screenshots from forums and Hacker News show crowded sidebars and excessive pop-ups—perfect for visually narrating UI bloat.


Your 2024 Wrapped
Made for you
Google
Your Wrapped AI podcast is ready
Try NotebookLM
My Wrapped AI podcast
SPOTIFY.COM/WRAPPEDAIPODCAST

A failed feature involving a podcast between two AI voices.

Design Proposals

Designing Against the Algorithm

The way we discover music is no longer led by curiosity—it's guided by code. For most users of streaming platforms like Spotify, recommendations arrive not as invitations, but as presumptions. The system believes it knows your taste better than you do. And often, it's right. But correctness isn't the same as connection. There's a growing divide between what is relevant and what feels real.

This project, Rhythm Over Algorithm, challenges that divide by rethinking how we structure discovery. It proposes a trio of features—Passport, Iceberg, and Listening Rooms—each anchored in a different design principle: serendipity, transparency, and co-exploration. These aren't just interface ideas. They're acts of refusal against the assumption that musical taste can be fully predicted. And they're proposals for how platforms can make room again for wonder, understanding, and shared experience.

Start with Passport. This feature doesn't ask what you've listened to. It asks where you haven't been. Curated by local tastemakers from different parts of the world, it lets users travel from Afrobeat to Amapiano, from Punjabi folk to São Paulo funk, in just a few taps. It's not a list of "global top hits." It's a sonic journey through unfamiliar geographies. There's no personalization algorithm deciding the order. That's the point. You're not the product. You're the traveler.

The power of Passport lies in its humility. It acknowledges the limits of your taste and offers an invitation instead of a prediction. When users know they're hearing from human curators who live and breathe the music of their region, it creates a deeper trust. It's not trying to please you—it's trying to show you something. This shifts the relationship from consumption to cultural exchange.

In a streaming culture that often compresses everything into one genre-fused aesthetic ("chill," "mood," "vibes"), Passport insists on difference. It's a gentle reminder that music is not just emotion—it's geography, history, and identity. And by foregrounding human curation over data loops, it balances algorithmic precision with cultural serendipity. It also disrupts the homogenizing effects of global playlists, which tend to privilege Western sounds and trends (Morris & Powers, 2015).

Then comes Iceberg. This feature is built on a simple but radical idea: that genres have depth. Most users only ever hear the surface. The top five hits, the playlist covers, the catchy chorus. But every genre has layers—subcultures, spin-offs, forgotten pioneers. Iceberg reveals them. Visually and sonically, it lets you dive deeper, connecting what you know with what's buried underneath.

Transparency is its core strength. Unlike the opaque black box of "Because you listened to...", Iceberg shows the pathways. It doesn't just tell you what's similar—it tells you why. The connections aren't hidden; they're mapped. You can trace the line from pop-reggaeton to early dembow, from hyperpop to 2000s nightcore, from modern jazz to South African marabi. Every user becomes their own musicologist, not by reading—but by listening and exploring.

This makes discovery feel earned, not handed to you. And in doing so, it restores a lost pleasure in digital listening: the pleasure of self-directed digging. There's a reason crate-digging at record stores felt rewarding—it wasn't about quantity, it was about intent. Iceberg simulates that through interface, not nostalgia. It respects the user enough to offer them complexity. And in a design landscape that often favors clean minimalism, that's a radical stance.

Finally, there are Listening Rooms. In a sea of personal feeds, this feature dares to be social. It recreates a scenario that once defined music culture: people in a room, playing songs, reacting, shaping a vibe together. Except here, the room is virtual—and possibly global. Listeners can jump in, queue tracks, chat, and discover music in real-time, as a group.

The key design value here is co-exploration. Unlike passive “shared playlists,” Headroom require presence. You’re not listening to a static collection; you’re in conversation, whether by emojis, typed reactions, or shared links. That makes discovery not just a solo stumble, but a collaborative act.

This also addresses a deeper emotional need. With more people working, commuting, and living in isolation, music has become background noise. Headroom makes it foreground again. It reclaims the ritual of joint listening, which once happened around cassettes, car rides, or speakers at parties. By restoring this shared frame, the platform gives users a reason to care about the act of listening —not just the outcome.

There’s also a subtle resistance embedded in the feature: it slows things down. Where feeds push the next track instantly, Headroom unfold in real time. This changes your attention. You’re not skipping, scanning, or multitasking. You’re present. And presence, in the attention economy, is a rare commodity. It’s what makes community possible.

Each of these features rejects the idea that personalization is the same as intimacy. They propose that music is most meaningful when it surprises us (Passport), when we understand it (Iceberg), and when we share it (Headroom). And they all suggest that the role of design in digital music is not to narrow choice—but to expand the ways we navigate it.

None of this is anti-technology. Algorithms are not villains. But their dominance has created a feedback loop that limits taste instead of expanding it. These features offer a counter-loop—one driven by curiosity, clarity, and connection. They don’t discard data science. They just put it in service of something more human.

This is what Rhythm Over Algorithm ultimately designs: not just a better interface, but a better experience of being a listener. One where you’re not nudged to conform, but invited to explore. One where your taste isn’t dictated, but formed—slowly, socially, and sometimes, by surprise.

Feature A : Geographic Discovery

Passport

Passport is a shift in direction. Instead of tracking what you already like, it asks you to pick a place and listen without preconceptions. No personalization engine, no pattern-matching. You land somewhere on a map—say, Niger—and hear what the locals are playing. These aren't anonymous playlists. They're handpicked selections by people who live inside the sound, not above it.

The design reflects this clarity of intent. The first screen shows a bold, flat-colored map in maroon and yellow, with no unnecessary ornamentation. The focus is on geography. The "Travel" button sits plainly at the bottom. Not "Listen" or "Discover," but "Travel"—a word that cues curiosity over convenience. When you enter a region, you're greeted with "You're in Niger!" alongside a full-screen photo of a traditional musician. It feels like a poster, not an interface—a way to center culture rather than functionality.

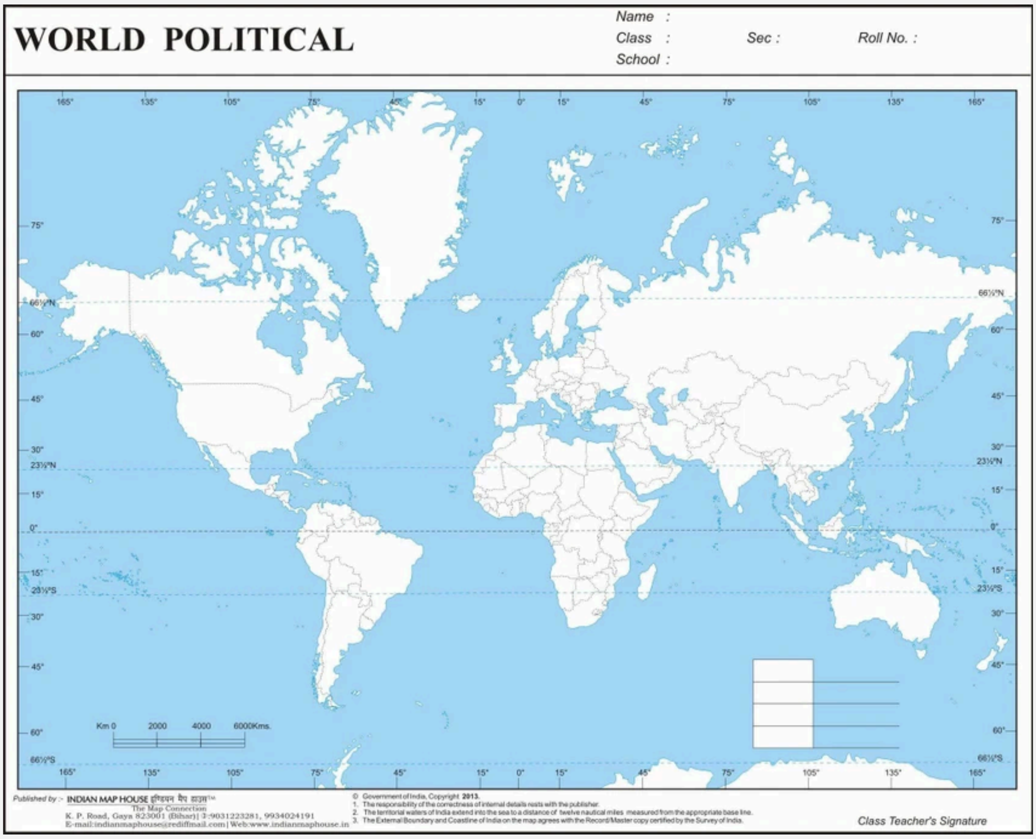
Below that, the playlist is short, clean, and artist-forward. No infinite scroll. No algorithmic shuffle. Just a handful of tracks: Mdou Moctar, Bombino, Mamar Kassey. You hear them in sequence, not as background, but as a guided experience. The playback screen quietly reminds you this is coming from *Passport*. Even here, Spotify's usual visual language takes a backseat. The design says: stay present.

The campaign carries this restraint into its messaging. "Locals know best." "No visa needed." "Move like you're there." The slogans avoid marketing gloss. They're confident, but grounded. The color scheme—sun-bleached yellow and deep maroon—rejects Spotify's default neon. This isn't about brand recognition. It's about world-building.

What sets Passport apart is its trust in human curation. There's no pretense of personalization. No claims of data-driven insight. Just music, framed by context, offered on someone else's terms. That act alone creates space for discovery that isn't shaped by algorithms or filtered through engagement metrics.

The interface makes room for slowness. The campaign speaks to humility. The feature doesn't ask for your feedback or optimize for retention. It offers a route—and lets you choose if you want to take it.

In an ecosystem where every tap is tracked, Passport offers a kind of quiet rebellion. It reminds listeners that music isn't just about mood or preference. Sometimes, it's about being somewhere else—fully, attentively, and without a map.


WORLD POLITICAL
Name :
Class :
Sec :
Roll No. :
School :
Km 0 2000 4000 6000Kms.
Published by :- INDIAN MAP HOUSE इंडियन मैप हाउस™
The Map Connection
K. P. Road, Gaya 823001 (Bihar) | ☎:9031223281, 9934024191
E-mail:indianmaphouse@rediffmail.com | Web:www.indianmaphouse.in
© Government of India, Copyright 2013.
1. The responsibility of the correctness of internal details rests with the publisher.
2. The territorial waters of India extend into the sea to a distance of twelve nautical miles measured from the appropriate base line.
3. The External Boundary and Coastline of India on the map agrees with the Record/Master copy certified by the Survey of India.
Class Teacher's Signature

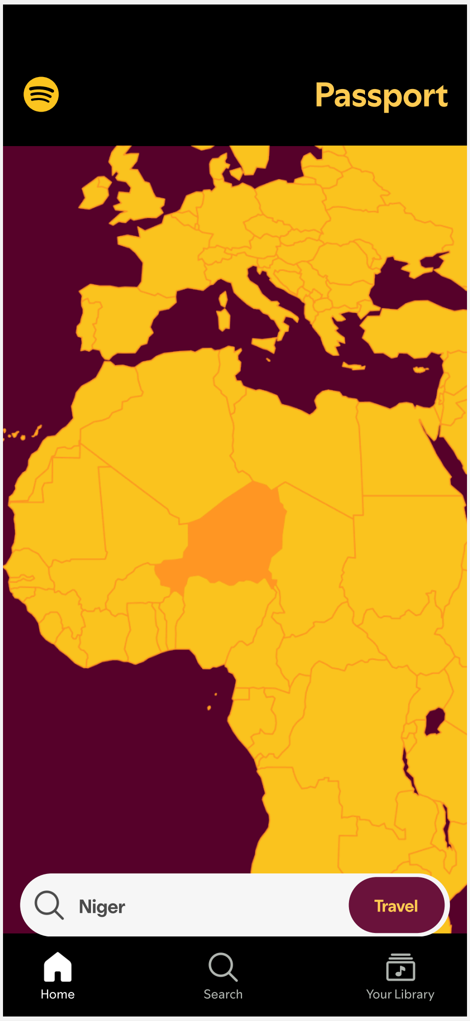
When I was in school, we were asked to buy this map for geographical exams and tests.

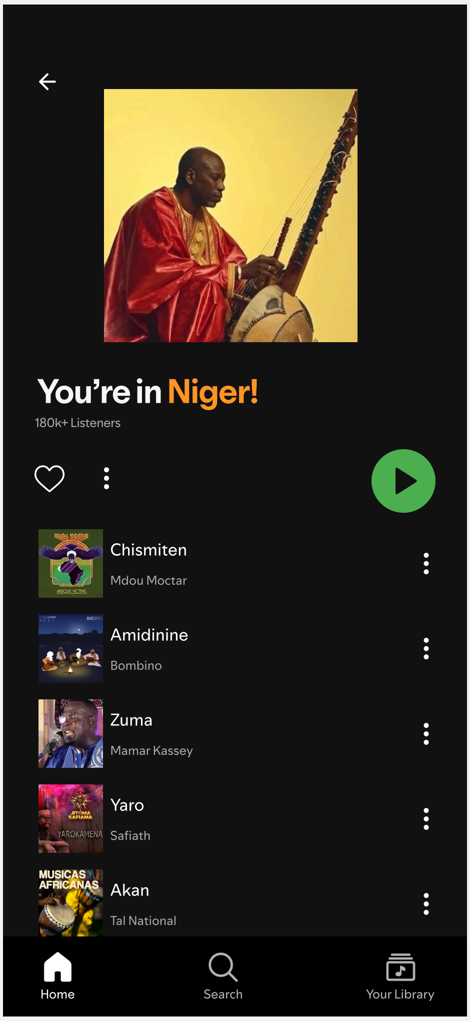
Maps are our first image of a world that is politically divided but naturally a singular entity. This were the inspiration for the UI sparked from.

Passport UI is an open world exploration of music and therefore it presents a world map fragmented in countries based on the political borders.

You can selected the country by tapping on it or searching for it on the search bar.

The ‘Travel’ Button presents a borderless music discovery. And leads you to a locally curated playlist.


Passport
Niger
Travel
Home
Search
Your Library



You’re in Niger!

180k+ Listeners

Chismiten
Mdou Moctar

Amidinine
Bombino

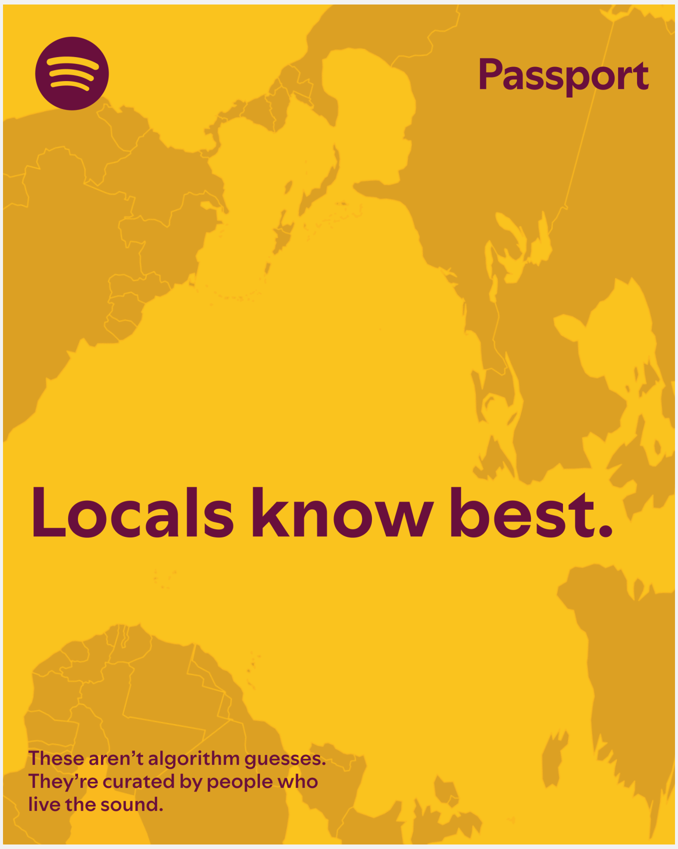
Zuma
Mamar Kassey

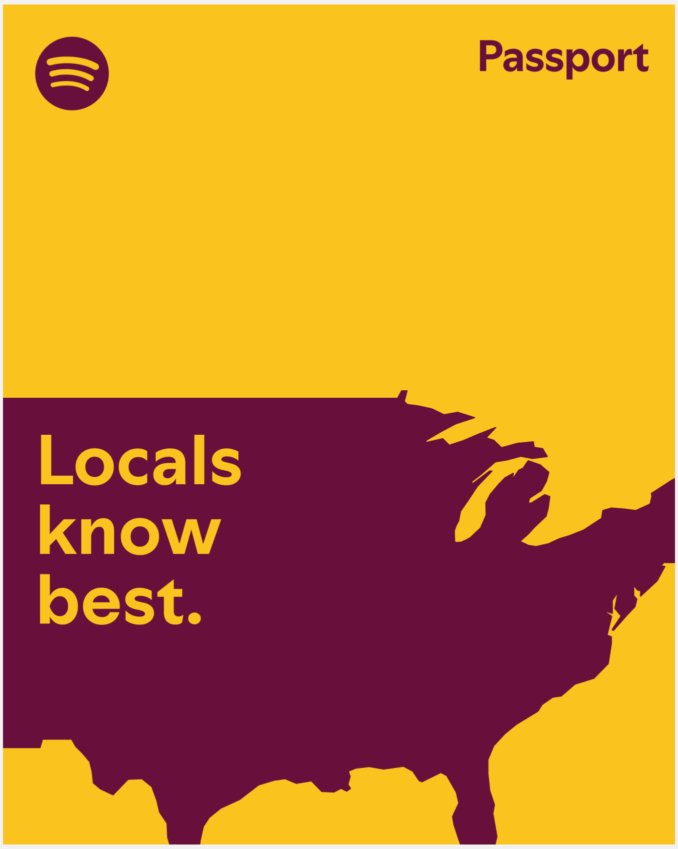
Yaro
Safiath

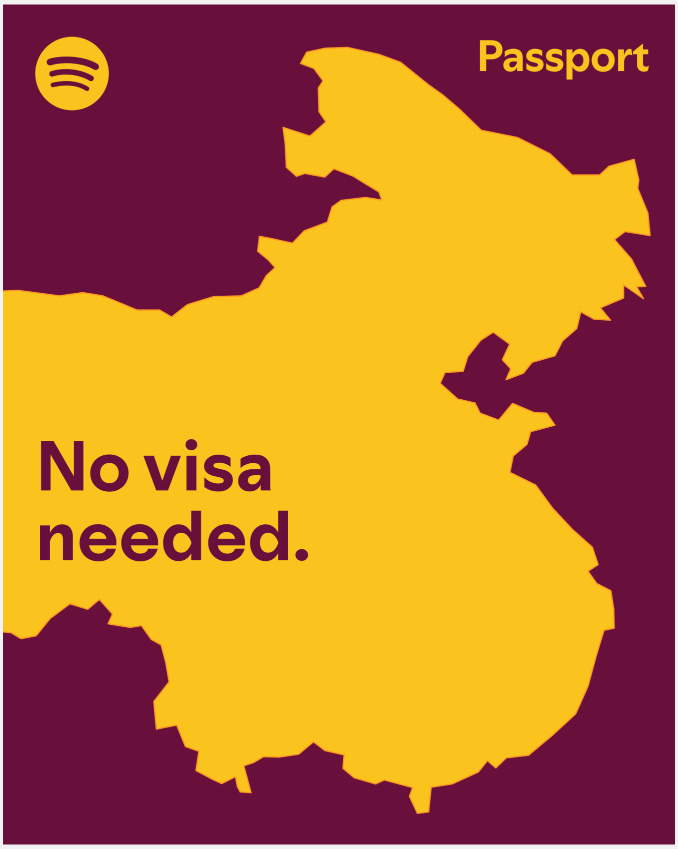
Akan
Tal National

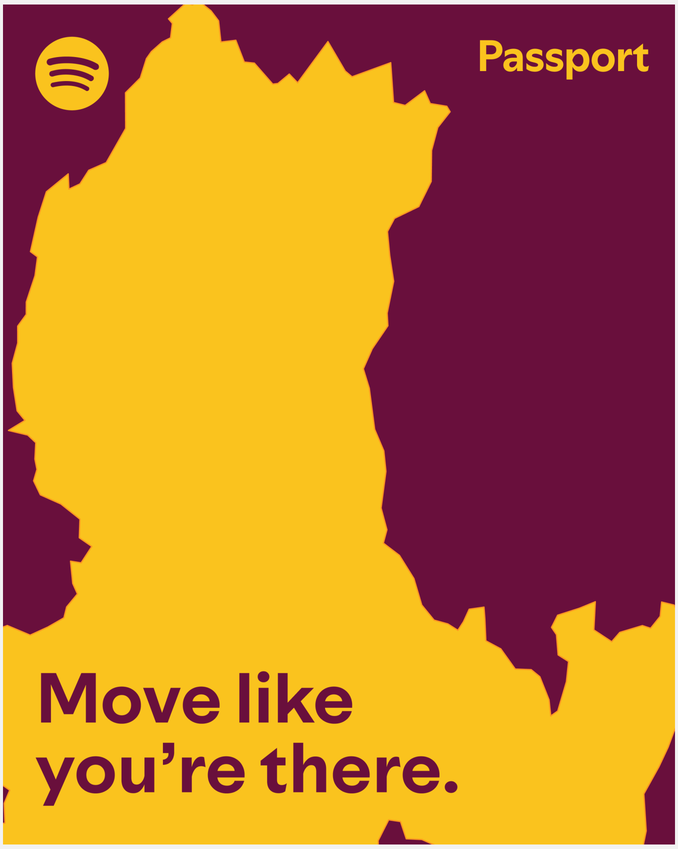
Home
Search
Your Library

Campaign Design


Passport
Locals know best.
These aren't algorithm guesses.
They're curated by people who
live the sound.


Passport
Locals
know
best.


Passport
No visa
needed.


Passport
Move like
you're there.

Feature B : Genre Discovery

Iceberg

Genres often mislead. Labels like “Blues” or “Electronic” flatten entire histories into marketing shortcuts. *Iceberg* challenges that by revealing the layers underneath. It treats genre as something to explore, not select. Instead of a list, it gives you a landscape—stacked, weighted, and textured.

The UI is designed to feel like tuning a radio. As you drag through a vertical list of genres, each one glows briefly, like a frequency coming into focus. The motion is quiet, precise. Words float in a 3D plane, receding into the dark. This isn’t a menu—it’s a dial. The visual depth mirrors the metaphor in the name. You’re diving into something that mostly sits below the surface.

Choose a subgenre like Desert Blues and the interface gently lands you in a space with a few carefully chosen tracks, a cover image, and a short sentence: “2% of listeners have heard this sub-genre.” That line is more than trivia—it lets you know you’re somewhere uncommon. The visuals support this. Tinariwen against Saharan rock, Bombino mid-performance. No genre tags, no emojis, no clutter. Just presence.

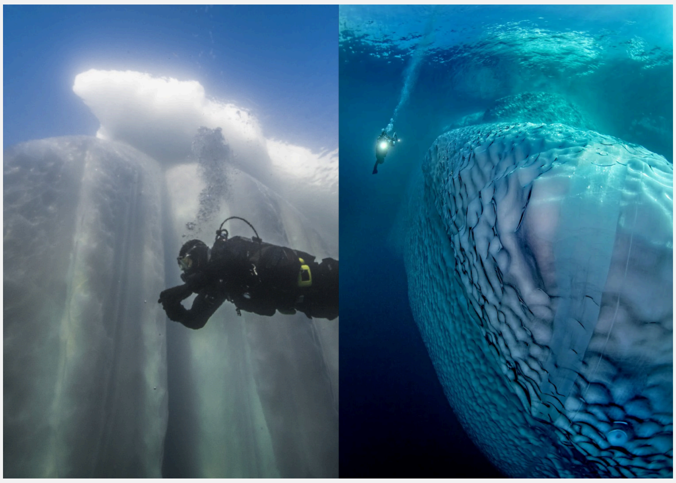
The player view keeps this tone. A small info box explains what you’re hearing—"Desert Blues blends traditional Tuareg melodies with electric blues, featuring hypnotic guitar riffs.” It doesn’t over-explain. It gives just enough to make the sound feel anchored.

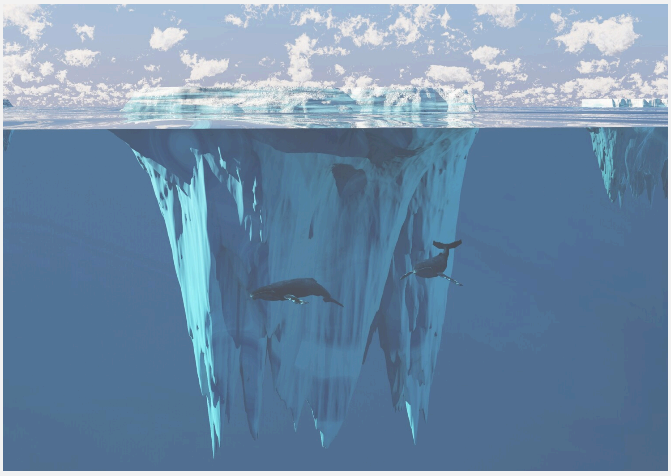
What makes this feature stand out is its refusal to recommend based on you. It’s not tracking your habits. It offers a path and lets you walk it. You’re not here because you might like something—you’re here because you’re curious.

The campaign carries this tone into its language and layout. “Genres don’t stop at the surface.” Text stretches and tilts, evoking the movement of diving or surfacing. There’s no pitch to “explore your vibe.” Instead, it names what other systems often skip: Neofolk, Crunk, Bachata, Garage Punk. Not as novelties, but as valid entry points into deep listening.

The visual identity is sharp and assertive. Bright blue backgrounds, white text, no gradients or illustrations. It looks more like a tool than a mood board. The visual clarity reflects a core design decision: to treat users not as consumers, but as seekers.

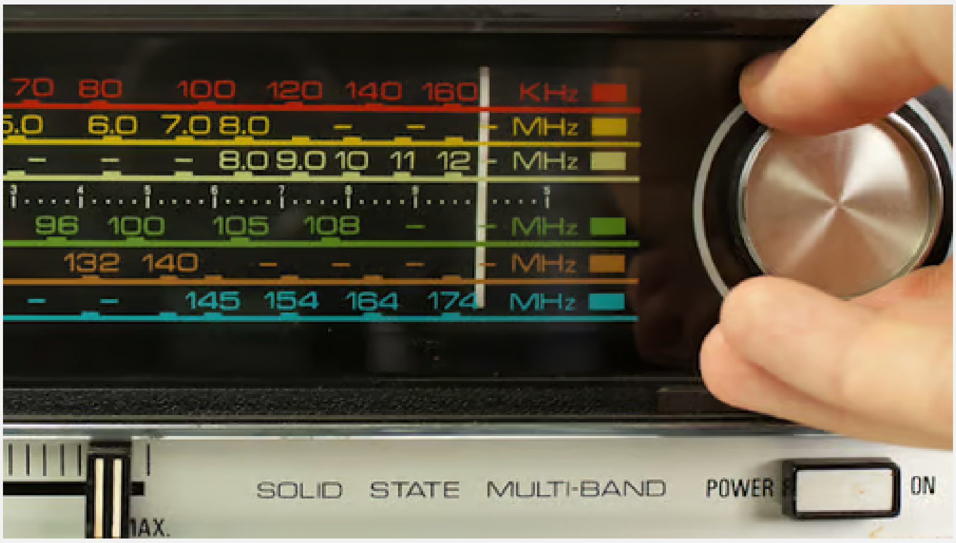
Iceberg doesn’t try to become your friend. It becomes a guide. Quiet, informative, generous. It trusts that music doesn’t need to chase attention if the interface gives it context. And it trusts that listeners will go deeper, if the surface isn’t the end of the story.





When exploring an iceberg, we're not just mapping ice; we're mapping patience, perseverance, and courage.

Reinhold Messner, 1980


KHz
MHz
SOLID STATE MULTI-BAND
POWER
ON

The dial on a radio gives the user an immense power to scroll through the vast and wide radio wave frequencies with fine tuning.

The line is on the interface shows you where you are on the spectrum.

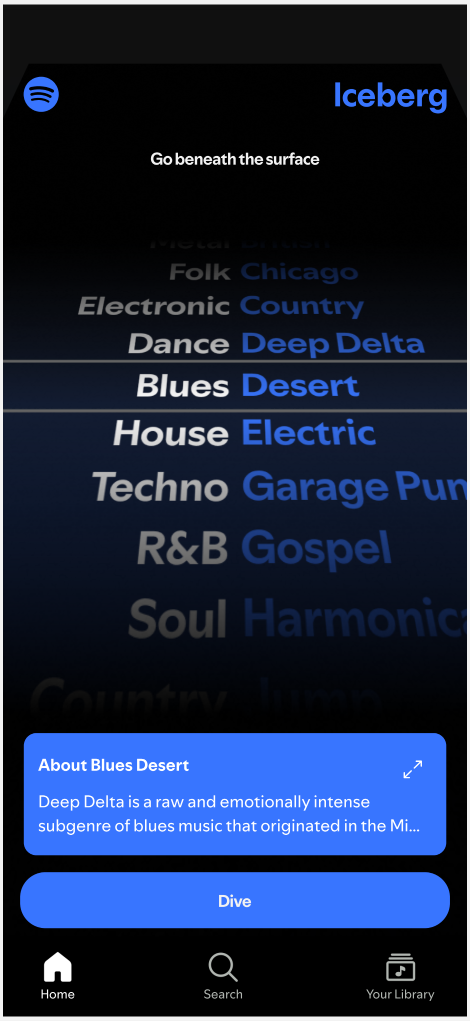
The UI takes inspiration from this experience and applies it in a vertical format.

“Go beneath the surface” signfies a presence of normative layer which can digged deeper for exploration.

The UI uses a system of Genres → Subgenres, which can be scrolled from left and right. Left side shows overarching surface level genres and the right side gives you choice based on nuance.

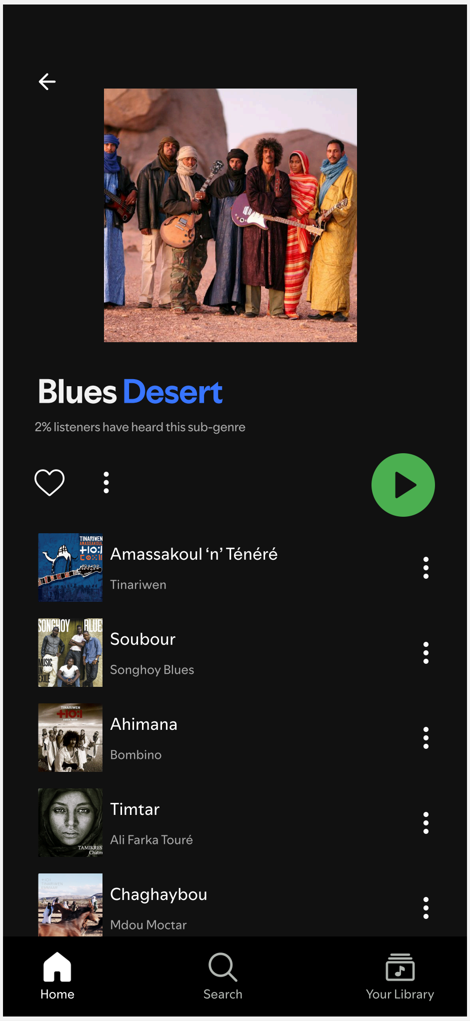
From top to bottom, you move from popular to niche choices. This presents a linearity to an alternate way of exploration.

The ‘Dive’ Button is accompanied with a ‘wiki-style’ description which would help the listener get context of the listening experience and a better choice option.


Iceberg
Go beneath the surface
Folk Chicago
Electronic Country
Dance Deep Delta
Blues Desert
House Electric
Techno Garage Pun
R&B Gospel
Soul Harmonic
Country Jump
Dive
Home
Search
Your Library

About Blues Desert

Deep Delta is a raw and emotionally intense subgenre of blues music that originated in the Mi...


Home
Search
Your Library

Blues Desert

2% listeners have heard this sub-genre

Amassakoul ‘n’ Ténéré
Tinariwen

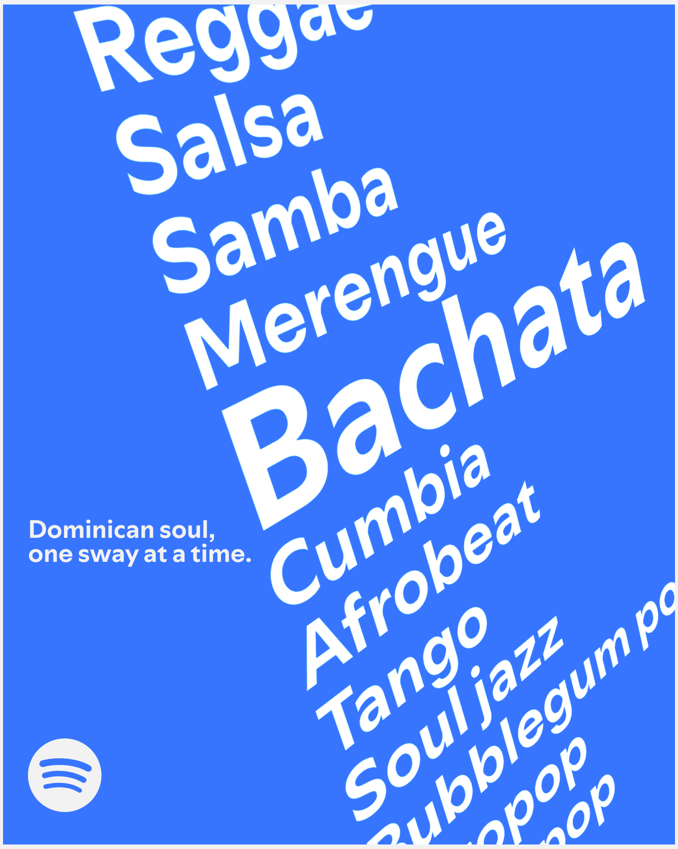
Soubour
Songhoy Blues

Ahimana
Bombino

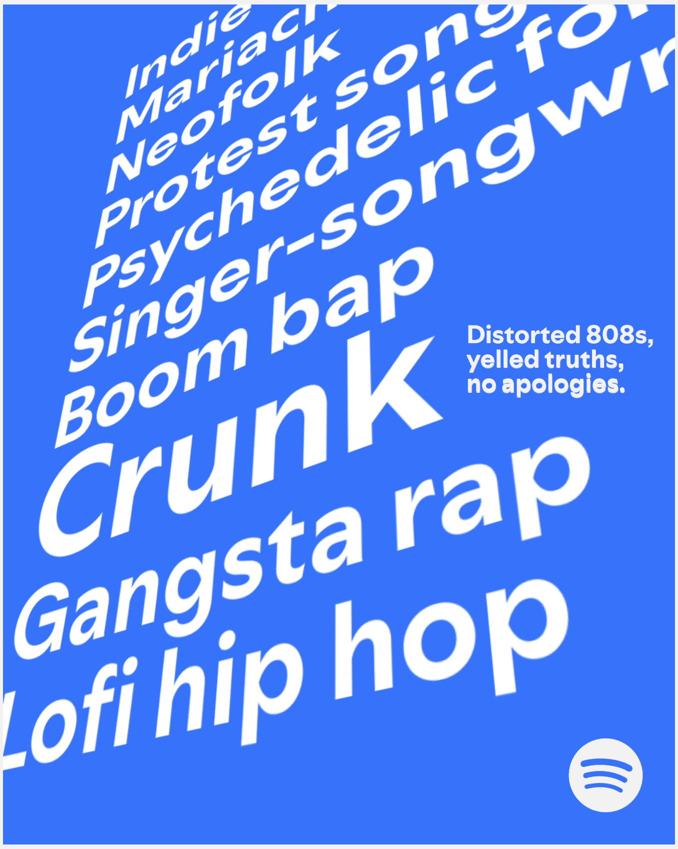
Timtar
Ali Farka Touré

Chaghaybou
Mdou Moctar

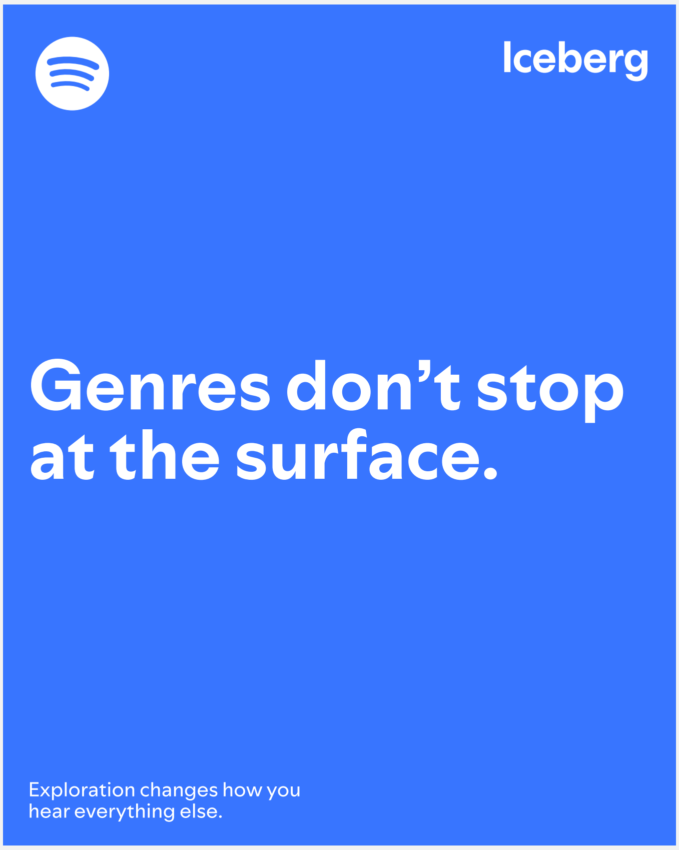
Campaign Design


Reggae
Salsa
Samba
Merengue
Bachata
Cumbia
Afrobeat
Tango
Soul jazz
Bubblegum po
opop
nop

Dominican soul,
one sway at a time.


Indie
Mariac
Neofolk
Protest son
Psychedelic fo
Singer-songwr
Boom bap
Crunk
Gangsta rap
Lofi hip hop

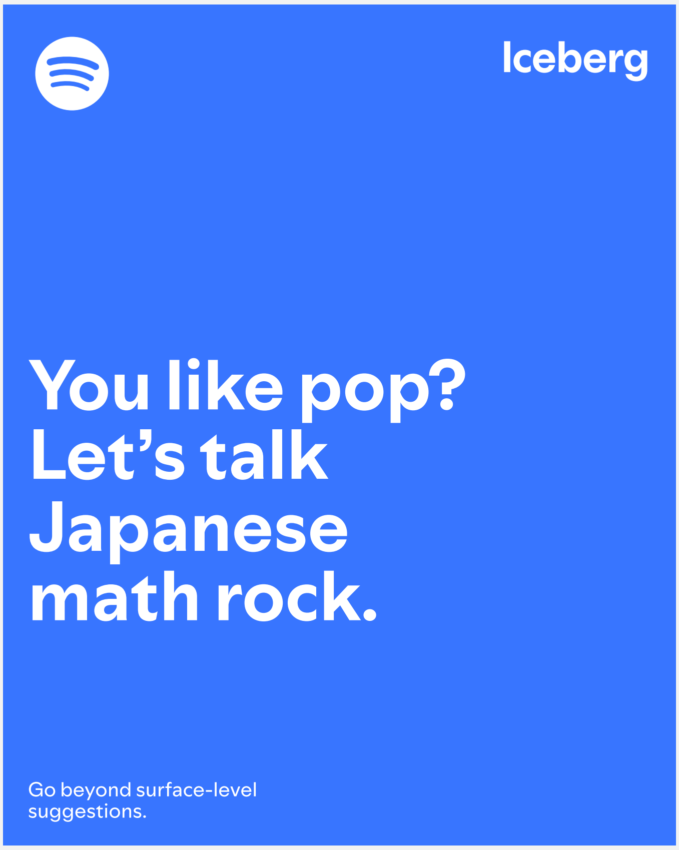
Distorted 808s,
yelled truths,
no apologies.



Iceberg

Genres don’t stop
at the surface.

Exploration changes how you
hear everything else.

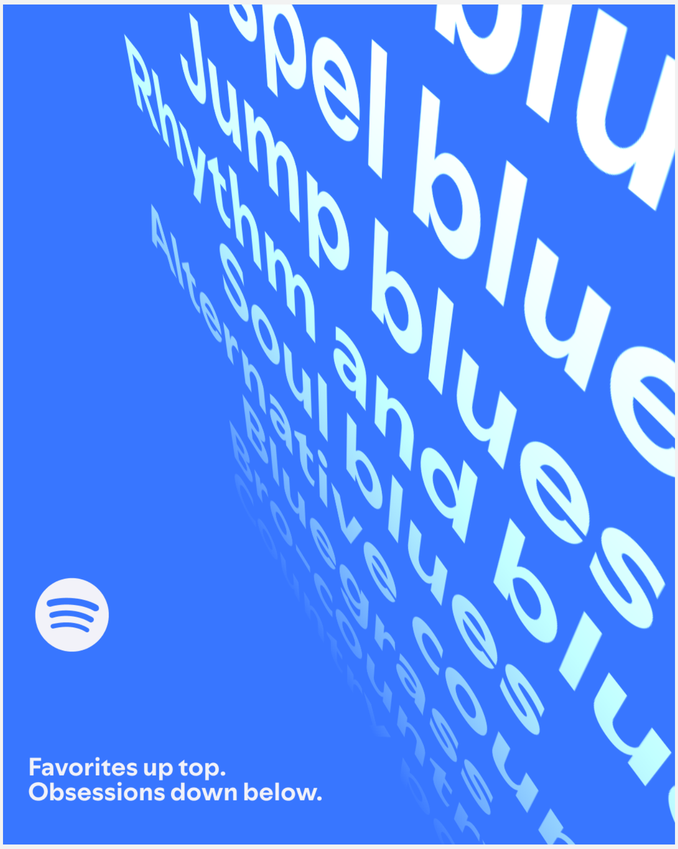


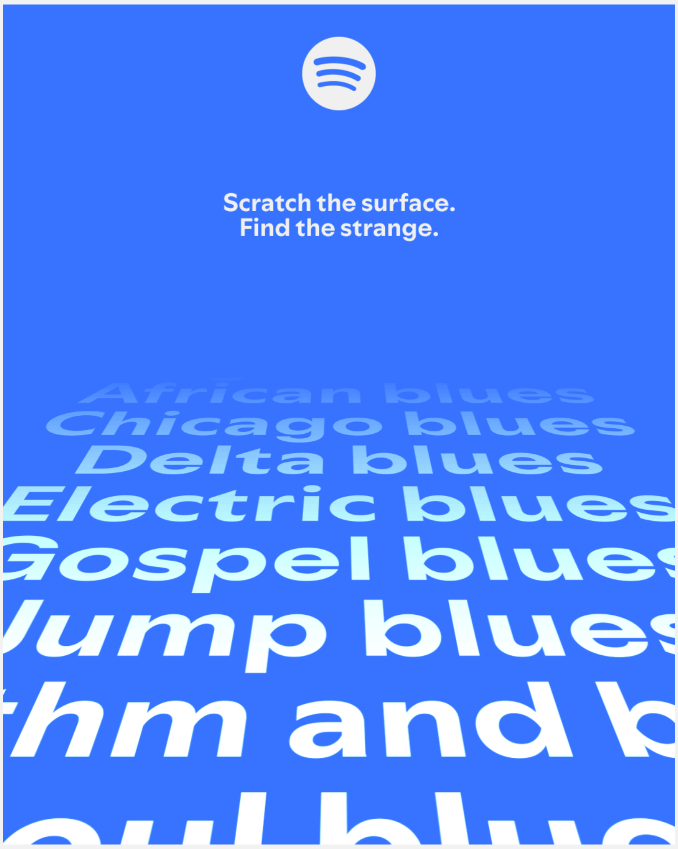
Iceberg

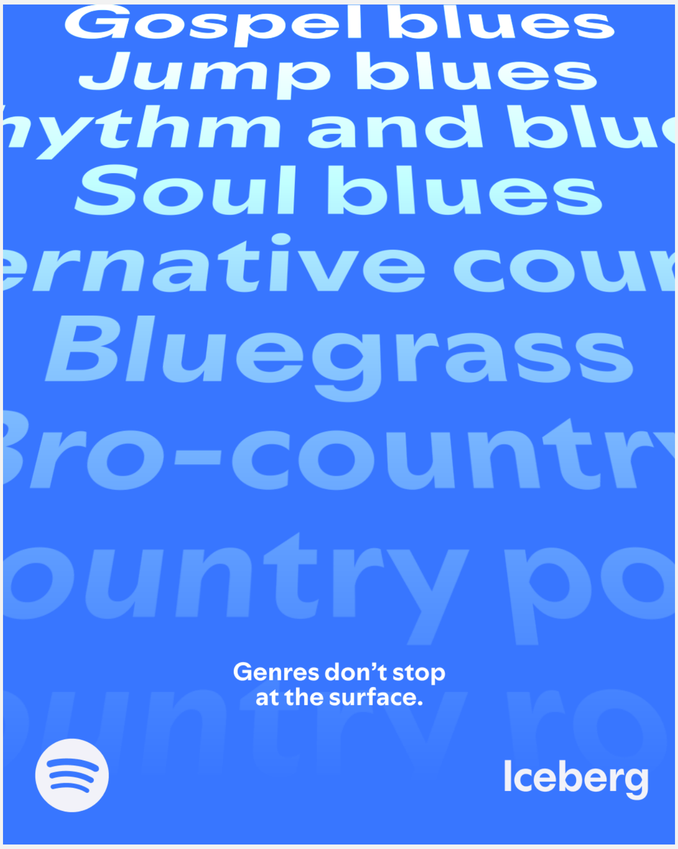
You like pop?
Let’s talk
Japanese
math rock.

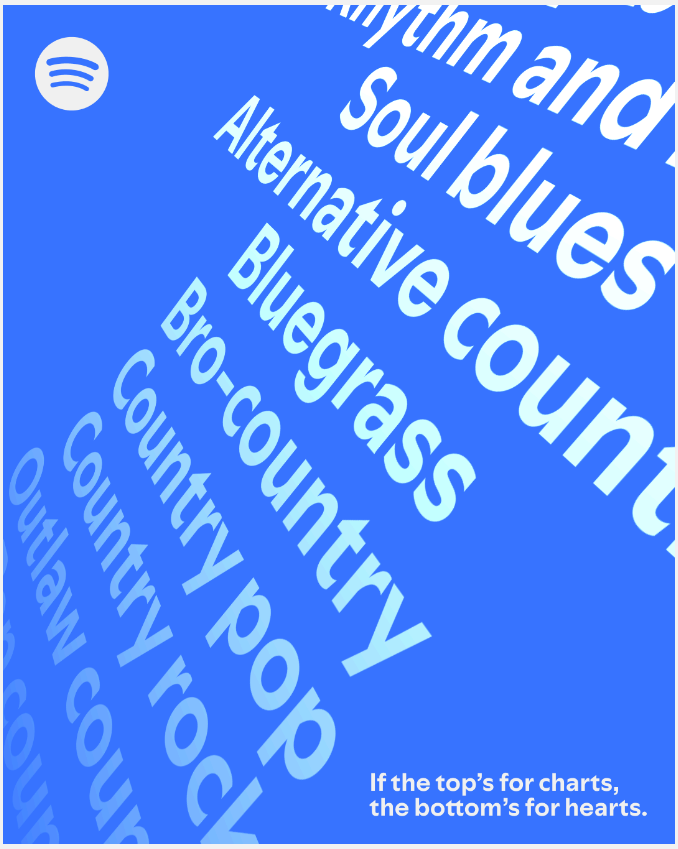
Go beyond surface-level
suggestions.

Campaign Design


Gospel blues
Jump blues
Rhythm and blues
Soul blues
Alternative country
Bluegrass
Favorites up top.
Obsessions down below.


Scratch the surface.
Find the strange.
African blues
Chicago blues
Delta blues
Electric blues
Gospel blues
Jump blues
Rhythm and blues
Soul blues


Gospel blues
Jump blues
Rhythm and blues
Soul blues
Alternative country
Bluegrass
Bro-country
Country pop
Country rock
Genres don't stop
at the surface.
Iceberg


Rhythm and blues
Soul blues
Alternative country
Bluegrass
Bro-country
Country pop
Country rock
Outlaw country
If the top's for charts,
the bottom's for hearts.

List of Genres

Total Genres: 1382
Categorized Genres: 686
Uncategorized Genres: 696

Categorized by common word. This is a limited list and not final.

AMBIENT

1. Ambient
2. Ambient Fusion
3. Ambient Idm
4. Ambient Psychill
5. Ambient Trance
6. Dark Ambient
7. Deep Ambient
8. Future Ambient
9. J-ambient
10. Organic Ambient

BLUES

1. Acoustic Blues
2. Blues
3. British Blues
4. Chicago Blues
5. Country Blues
6. Deep Delta Blues
7. Delta Blues
8. Desert Blues
9. Electric Blues
10. Garage Punk Blues
11. Gospel Blues
12. Harmonica Blues
13. Jump Blues
14. Louisiana Blues
15. Memphis Blues
16. Modern Blues
17. New Orleans Blues
18. Piano Blues
19. Piedmont Blues
20. Punk Blues
21. Soul Blues
22. Southern Soul Blues
23. Swamp Blues
24. Texas Blues
25. Traditional Blues

CLASSICAL

1. Classical
2. Classical Christmas
3. Classical Flute
4. Classical Guitar
5. Classical Organ
6. Classical Performance
7. Classical Period
8. Classical Piano
9. Contemporary Classical
10. Deep Classical Piano
11. Hindustani Classical
12. Indian Classical
13. Modern Classical
14. Spanish Classical
15. Turkish Classical

COUNTRY

1. Alternative Country
2. Australian Country
3. Canadian Country
4. Contemporary Country
5. Country
6. Country Christmas
7. Country Dawn
8. Country Gospel
9. Country Road
10. Deep Contemporary Country
11. Neo-traditional Country
12. Outlaw Country
13. Texas Country
14. Traditional Country

DANCE

1. Alternative Dance
2. Australian Dance
3. Belly Dance
4. British Dance Band
5. Bubblegum Dance
6. Christian Dance
7. Dance-punk
8. Intelligent Dance Music
9. Italo Dance
10. J-dance

FOLK

1. Anti-folk
2. Appalachian Folk
3. Arab Folk
4. Armenian Folk
5. Breton Folk
6. British Folk
7. Caucasian Folk
8. Central Asian Folk
9. Contemporary Folk
10. Corsican Folk
11. Czech Folk
12. Deep Nordic Folk
13. Drone Folk
14. Folk
15. Folk Christmas
16. Folk Punk
17. Folk-prog
18. Freak Folk
19. French Folk
20. Geek Folk
21. Indie Folk
22. Irish Folk
23. Italian Folk
24. Kurdish Folk
25. Malagasy Folk
26. Nl Folk
27. Nordic Folk
28. Spanish Folk
29. String Folk
30. Swiss Folk
31. Traditional British Folk
32. Traditional Folk
33. Traditional Irish Folk
34. Traditional Scottish Folk
35. Turbo Folk
36. Turkish Folk
37. Vintage Country Folk

FUNK

1. Baile Funk
2. Cumbia Funk
3. Deep Funk
4. Deep G Funk
5. Funk
6. Funk Carioca
7. G Funk
8. Liquid Funk
9. P Funk
10. Traditional Funk

DANCE

1. Alternative Dance
2. Australian Dance
3. Belly Dance
4. British Dance Band
5. Bubblegum Dance
6. Christian Dance
7. Dance-punk
8. Intelligent Dance Music
9. Italo Dance
10. J-dance

HIP HOP

1. Abstract Hip Hop
2. Alternative Hip Hop
3. Australian Hip Hop
4. Austrian Hip Hop
5. Bay Area Hip Hop
6. Brazilian Hip Hop
7. Canadian Hip Hop
8. Christian Hip Hop
9. Danish Hip Hop
10. Deep East Coast Hip Hop
11. Detroit Hip Hop
12. Dutch Hip Hop
13. East Coast Hip Hop
14. Finnish Hip Hop
15. French Hip Hop
16. German Hip Hop
17. Greek Hip Hop
18. Hardcore Hip Hop
19. Hip Hop
20. Hip Hop Quebecois
21. Hip Hop Tuga
22. Hungarian Hip Hop
23. Italian Hip Hop
24. Latin Hip Hop
25. Memphis Hip Hop
26. Norwegian Hip Hop
27. Old School Hip Hop
28. Outer Hip Hop
29. Polish Hip Hop
30. Russian Hip Hop
31. Slovak Hip Hop
32. Southern Hip Hop
33. Spanish Hip Hop
34. Swedish Hip Hop
35. Swiss Hip Hop
36. Turkish Hip Hop
37. Uk Hip Hop
38. Underground Hip Hop
39. Underground Latin Hip Hop

HOUSE

1. Acid House
2. Bouncy House
3. Chicago House
4. Dark Progressive House
5. Deep Deep House
6. Deep Deep Tech House
7. Deep Disco House
8. Deep Euro House
9. Deep Funk House
10. Deep House
11. Deep Melodic House
12. Deep Progressive House
13. Deep Soul House
14. Deep Tech House
15. Deep Vocal House
16. Disco House
17. Dutch House
18. Electro House
19. Fidget House
20. Filter House
21. Greek House
22. Hard House
23. Hip House
24. House
25. Lounge House
26. Minimal Tech House
27. Nordic House
28. Outsider House
29. Progressive Electro House
30. Progressive House
31. Progressive Trance House
32. Tech House
33. Tribal House
34. Vapor House
35. Vocal House
36. Witch House

INDIE

1. Albuquerque Indie
2. Argentine Indie
3. Athens Indie
4. Australian Indie
5. Belgian Indie
6. Brazilian Indie
7. Brooklyn Indie
8. Canadian Indie
9. Chicago Indie
10. Columbus Ohio Indie
11. Dallas Indie
12. Danish Indie
13. Deep Canadian Indie
14. Deep German Indie
15. Deep Indie Singer-songwriter
16. Denver Indie
17. Finnish Indie
18. German Indie
19. Greek Indie
20. Indie Christmas
21. Indie Emo
22. Indie Fuzzpop
23. Indie Shoegaze
24. Indie Singer-songwriter
25. Indonesian Indie
26. Irish Indie
27. J-indie
28. K-indie
29. Kc Indie
30. La Indie
31. Leeds Indie
32. Louisville Indie
33. Mexican Indie
34. Michigan Indie
35. Northern Irish Indie
36. Nz Indie
37. Perth Indie
38. Polish Indie
39. Portland Indie
40. Rva Indie
41. Seattle Indie
42. Sheffield Indie
43. Slc Indie
44. Stl Indie
45. Thai Indie
46. Triangle Indie
47. Twin Cities Indie
48. Vancouver Indie
49. Vegas Indie
50. Vienna Indie

POP

1. Acoustic Pop
2. Albanian Pop
3. Alternative Pop
4. Antiviral Pop
5. Arab Pop
6. Australian Pop
7. Bow Pop
8. Brazilian Pop Music
9. Brill Building Pop
10. Bubblegum Pop
11. C-pop
12. Canadian Pop
13. Candy Pop
14. Chamber Pop
15. Classic Belgian Pop
16. Classic Chinese Pop
17. Classic Colombian Pop
18. Classic Czech Pop
19. Classic Danish Pop
20. Classic Dutch Pop
21. Classic Finnish Pop
22. Classic French Pop
23. Classic Italian Pop
24. Classic Norwegian Pop
25. Classic Peruvian Pop
26. Classic Polish Pop
27. Classic Russian Pop
28. Classic Swedish Pop
29. Classic Turkish Pop
30. Classic Venezuelan Pop
31. Croatian Pop
32. Dance Pop
33. Danish Pop
34. Deep Acoustic Pop
35. Deep Brazilian Pop
36. Deep Dance Pop
37. Deep Indian Pop
38. Deep Indie Pop
39. Deep Pop Emo
40. Deep Pop Punk
41. Deep Power-pop Punk
42. Deep Turkish Pop
43. Dominican Pop
44. Dream Pop
45. Dutch Pop
46. Estonian Pop
47. Ethiopian Pop
48. Faroese Pop
49. Finnish Pop
50. Folk-pop
51. French Folk Pop
52. French Indie Pop
53. French Pop
54. Garage Pop
55. Gauze Pop
56. German Pop
57. Grunge Pop
58. Hip Pop
59. Hungarian Pop
60. Icelandic Pop
61. Indian Pop
62. Indie Dream Pop
63. Indie Pop
64. Indie Psych-pop
65. Indonesian Pop
66. Italian Indie Pop
67. Italian Pop
68. J-pop
69. Jangle Pop
70. K-pop
71. Latin Pop
72. Latvian Pop
73. Malaysian Pop
74. Mande Pop
75. Math Pop
76. New Wave Pop
77. Noise Pop
78. Norwegian Pop
79. Operatic Pop
80. Pakistani Pop
81. Persian Pop
82. Polish Pop
83. Polynesian Pop
84. Pop
85. Pop Christmas
86. Pop Emo
87. Pop House
88. Pop Punk
89. Pop Rap
90. Portuguese Pop
91. Power Pop
92. Power-pop Punk
93. Romanian Pop
94. Russian Pop
95. Shimmer Pop
96. Shiver Pop
97. Singaporean Pop
98. Slovak Pop
99. Soda Pop
100. Spanish Indie Pop
101. Spanish Pop
102. Stomp Pop
103. Swamp Pop
104. Swedish Indie Pop
105. Swedish Pop
106. Swedish Pop Punk
107. Swedish Soft Pop
108. Taiwanese Pop
109. Teen Pop
110. Thai Pop
111. Turkish Pop
112. Twee Indie Pop
113. Twee Pop
114. Underground Pop Rap
115. Underground Power Pop
116. Vietnamese Pop
117. Vintage Swedish Pop
118. Viral Pop

PUNK

1. Anarcho-punk
2. Brazilian Punk
3. Celtic Punk
4. Christian Punk
5. Crust Punk
6. Deep German Punk
7. Deep Gothic Post-punk
8. Deep Hardcore Punk
9. Emo Punk
10. Fast Melodic Punk
11. French Punk
12. Garage Punk
13. German Punk
14. Gothic Post-punk
15. Hardcore Punk
16. Horror Punk
17. Indie Post-punk
18. Italian Punk
19. J-punk
20. Noise Punk
21. Norwegian Punk
22. Polish Punk
23. Post-punk
24. Punk
25. Punk Christmas
26. Punk Ska
27. Russian Punk
28. Screamo Punk
29. Ska Punk
30. Skate Punk
31. Slash Punk
32. Spanish Punk
33. Street Punk
34. Swedish Punk
35. Uk Post-punk

R&B

1. Alternative R&b
2. Deep Alternative R&b
3. Indie R&b
4. Japanese R&b
5. R&b
6. Smooth Urban R&b

REGGAE

1. Argentine Reggae
2. French Reggae
3. Gospel Reggae
4. Polish Reggae
5. Reggae
6. Reggae Fusion
7. Roots Reggae
8. Skinhead Reggae
9. Spanish Reggae
10. Swedish Reggae
11. Traditional Reggae
12. Vintage Reggae

SOUL

1. Chicago Soul
2. Deep Northern Soul
3. Deep Southern Soul
4. Memphis Soul
5. Neo Soul
6. Northern Soul
7. Post-disco Soul
8. Soul
9. Soul Christmas
10. Soul Flow
11. Southern Soul
12. Traditional Soul

TECHNO

1. Acid Techno
2. Ambient Dub Techno
3. Dark Minimal Techno
4. Deep Dub Techno
5. Deep Minimal Techno
6. Destroy Techno
7. Detroit Techno
8. Dub Techno
9. German Techno
10. Hardcore Techno
11. Minimal Melodic Techno
12. Minimal Techno
13. Re:techno
14. Techno

WORLD

1. Fourth World
2. World
3. World Chill
4. World Christmas
5. World Fusion

Feature C - Shared Exploration

Headroom

Headroom introduces shared listening as a core experience, not an afterthought. It brings back what streaming quietly erased—real-time, collective reactions. Instead of playing songs into a void, users can drop into rooms, tune in with others, and feel the presence of someone else hearing the same beat at the same moment. The feature treats listening less like a transaction and more like a hangout.

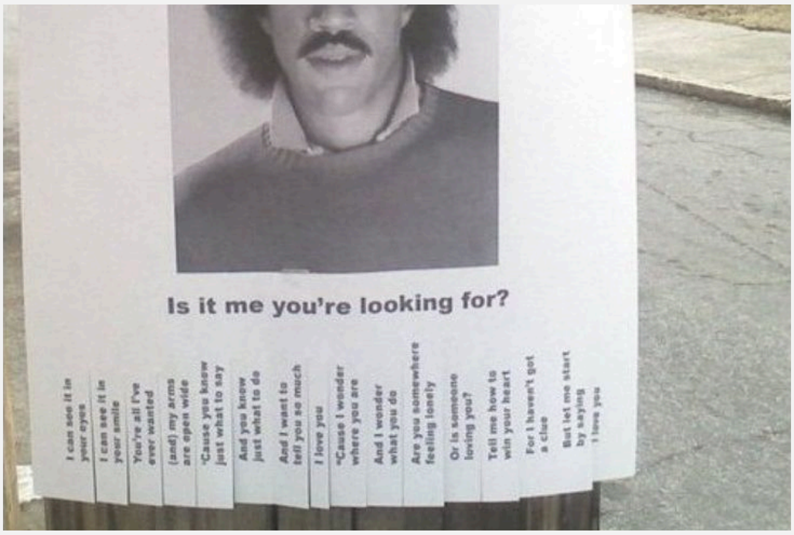
The interface takes direct inspiration from physical culture—specifically, the perforated event posters seen on music venue walls, where tags dangle for people to tear off. Rooms are listed like a vertical flyer board: “Listening in the Dark,” “Music Stop w/ Anya,” “The Archive Unlocks.” Each has a gradient label that glows gently against the dark UI, signaling whether the session is live, queued, or finished. You don’t browse passively—you join like you would step into a club set halfway through. No ceremony, no setup. Just enter.

Inside a room, the player screen remains familiar, but gains two new layers. First: cueing. Listeners can drop tracks into the queue. This is informal curation—not playlists, but vibes negotiated in the moment. Second: live chat. Comments scroll as the track plays, with reactions like “yo this part lives rent free in my head” or “rewind that drop omg.” The tone is loose, emotional, unfiltered. It’s a group chat stitched into the track’s timeline.

The UI resists flashy distractions. A dark navy background, soft gradients, and flat buttons keep the space calm and focused. Typographically, it leans into soft sans-serif with expressive line spacing. The campaign posters mirror this: “Different cities. Same song. One room.” The type shifts color gently, echoing LED glows in dim interiors. Another line reads: “Group chat energy. Headphone intimacy.” The copy walks the line between poetic and concrete—exactly where a social music product needs to sit.

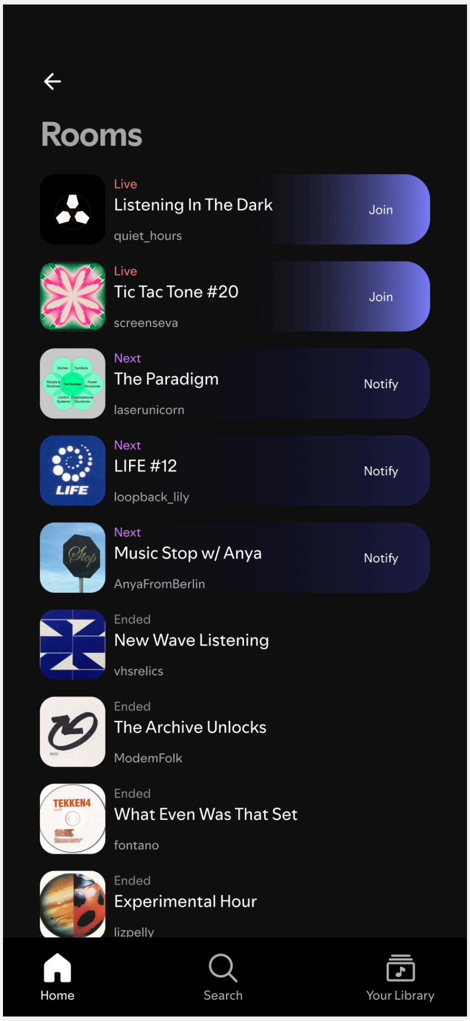
This isn’t just about syncing playback. It’s about re-centering music as a moment that happens with others. It mimics how people listen in dorm rooms, late-night car rides, or across shared headphones on a train. But instead of trying to simulate proximity through avatars or fake “spaces,” Headroom keeps it grounded. You’re listening to the track. The chat is ambient. The room is real because the music is happening now, with you in it.

What makes Headroom effective is its restraint. It doesn’t gamify presence or push algorithmic curation. You choose the room. You decide how long to stay. You drop in, vibe, and leave when it’s time. That sense of autonomy—alongside the comfort of shared experience—is what sets it apart from typical feed-based discovery.


Is it me you're looking for?
I can see it in your eyes
I can see it in your smile
You're all I've ever wanted
(and) my arms are open wide
'Cause you know just what to say
And you know just what to do
And I want to tell you so much
I love you
'Cause I wonder where you are
And I wonder what you do
Are you somewhere feeling lonely
Or is someone loving you?
Tell me how to win your heart
For I haven't got a clue
But let me start by saying
I love you

Detachable tags on a posters in our physical world present us an exclusive experience of various events through out the world.

The 'Rooms' section takes inspiration from this and presents a tag-like button which when pushed takes you to exclusive listening rooms.


Rooms

Live
Listening In The Dark
quiet_hours

Live
Tic Tac Tone #20
screenseva

Next
The Paradigm
laserunicorn

Next
LIFE #12
loopback_lily

Next
Music Stop w/ Anya
AnyaFromBerlin

Ended
New Wave Listening
vhsrelics

Ended
The Archive Unlocks
ModemFolk

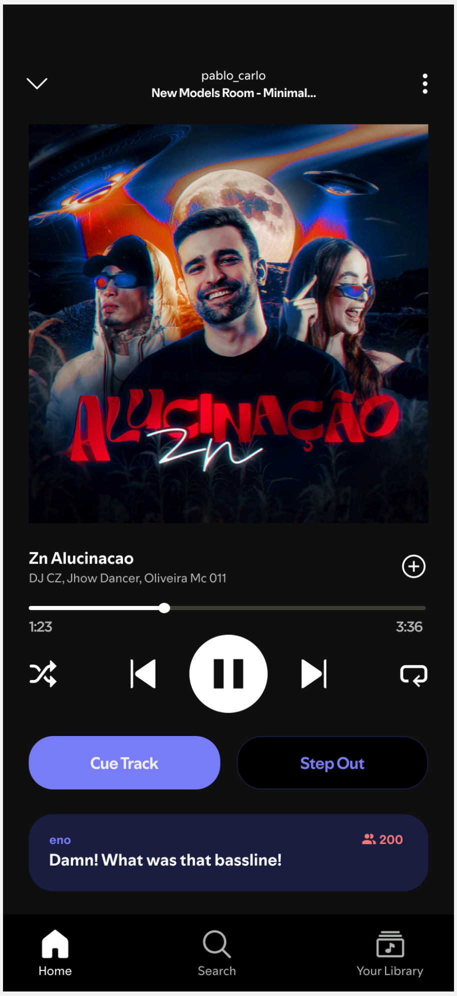
Ended
What Even Was That Set
fontano

Ended
Experimental Hour
lizpelly
Join
Join
Notify
Notify
Notify
Home
Search
Your Library

The room itself features a 'Cue Track' button to put the next track of your choice in queue, along with the 'Step Out' button to exit the room.

At the bottom, a live chat preview is present which shows the latest comment during the live session and the total number of listeners which are part of the room.

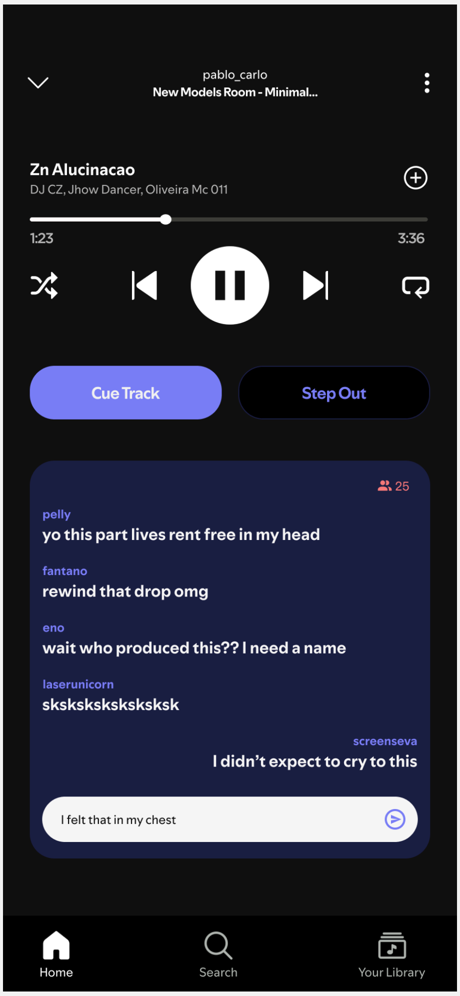
Once the chat box is tapped, it opens it so anyone can become part of the live discourse by commenting.


pablo_carlo
New Models Room - Minimal...

Zn Alucinacao
DJ CZ, Jhow Dancer, Oliveira Mc 011

1:23 3:36

eno
Damn! What was that bassline!
ALUCINAÇÃO
Zn
Cue Track
Step Out
200
Home
Search
Your Library


pablo_carlo
New Models Room - Minimal...

Zn Alucinacao
DJ CZ, Jhow Dancer, Oliveira Mc 011

1:23 3:36

pelly
yo this part lives rent free in my head

fantano
rewind that drop omg

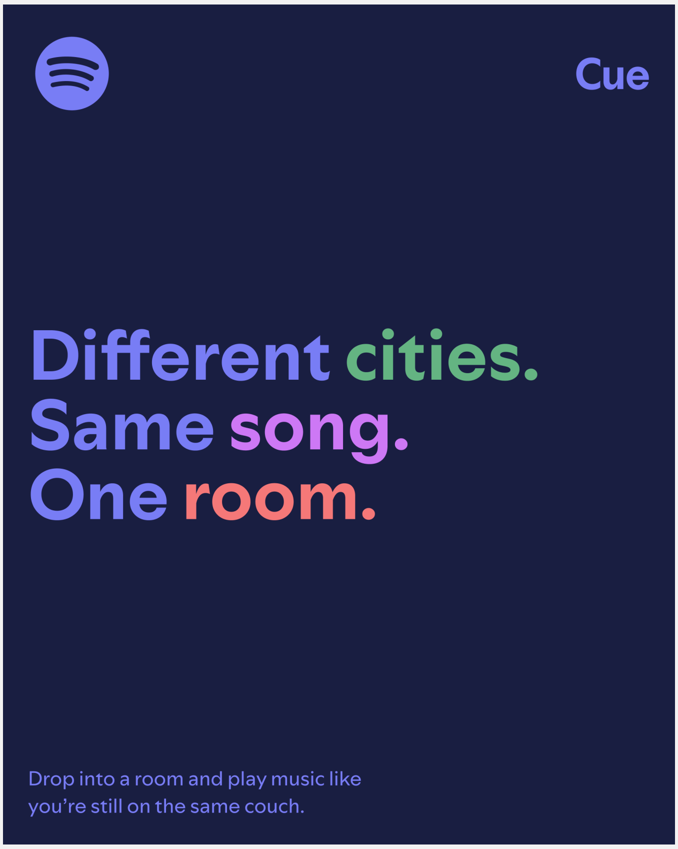
eno
wait who produced this?? I need a name

laserunicorn
sksksksksksksksk

screenseva
I didn't expect to cry to this

I felt that in my chest
Cue Track
Step Out
25
Home
Search
Your Library

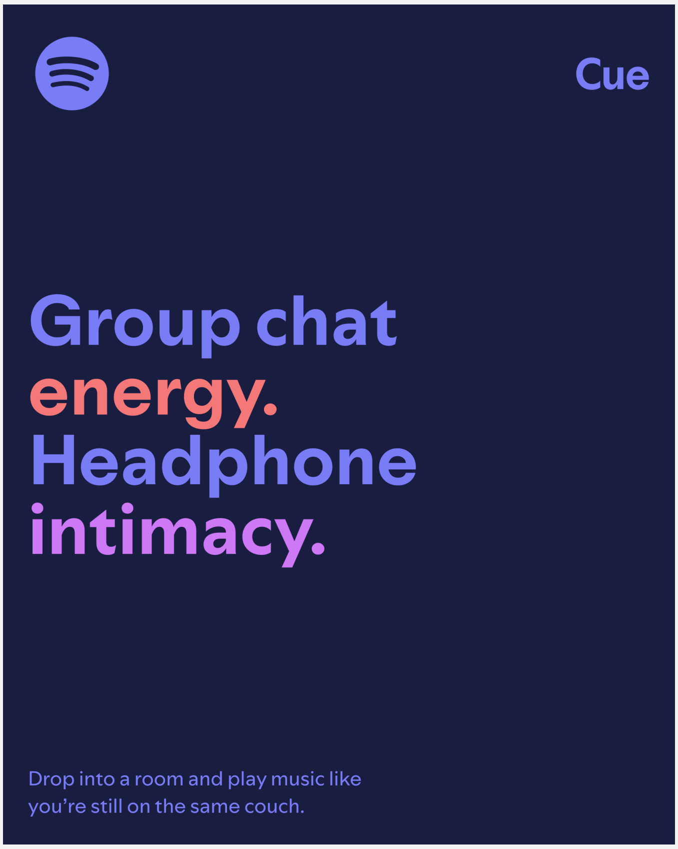
Campaign Design



Cue

Different cities.
Same song.
One room.

Drop into a room and play music like
you’re still on the same couch.



Cue

Group chat
energy.
Headphone
intimacy.

Drop into a room and play music like
you’re still on the same couch.

Conclusions & Future Directions

Key Findings against Research Questions

This project began with eight research questions—each probing a different facet of the music discovery experience. The goal was never to answer them all fully, but to engage with them through design. By creating alternative features like *Passport*, *Iceberg*, and *Headroom*, the project tested new possibilities against old systems. What follows is a synthesis of what these experiments revealed.

1. How do recommendations impact listener agency?

Finding: Predictive systems narrow agency by shifting users from curious seekers to passive responders.

Most current recommendation models assume that agency is about having endless choice. But in practice, users rarely stray from what's suggested. With personalization comes passivity. *Passport* and *Iceberg* intervened in that cycle by placing a decision in the user's hands. You have to choose a country. You have to decide to "dive" into a genre. These moments—small as they seem—reawaken intentionality. Users who engaged with these features described feeling more curious and present, even when they didn't love what they heard. That shift—from being fed to choosing to seek—is the clearest marker of regained agency.

2. Does providing a natural-choice option boost trust?

Finding: Trust improves when users understand how a recommendation works and feel free to ignore it.

Trust isn't about accuracy—it's about clarity. **Iceberg** and **Passport** don't pretend to know what you'll like. They simply say, "Here's where this music comes from. Want to check it out?" Users trusted the platform more not because they liked every result, but because they understood the logic behind it. Iceberg especially framed genre as a journey, not a prescription. It showed how styles relate and evolve, inviting curiosity without pressure. That clarity—combined with the ability to opt in or out—replaces opaque "For You" feeds with something more honest and respectful.

3. Do geographic features broaden cultural discovery?

Finding: Geography-driven interfaces foster deeper exploration when paired with local curatorship and user agency.

The **Passport** feature invited users to "travel" through music—manually choosing countries and exploring local scenes curated by people who actually live there. This framing proved effective. Users didn't feel like tourists in a generic "global" playlist. They felt like guests in a specific soundscape. This sense of local grounding countered the tendency of Spotify's algorithms to flatten genre boundaries and prioritize Western popular forms. Listeners spent more time with unfamiliar tracks when they had a clear reason to care: place, identity, culture. The combination of geographic specificity and human curation proved more engaging than any automatic global hits shuffle.

4. How does context-based discovery compare to pure algorithmic suggestion?

<ins>Finding: Context-based discovery leads to slower sessions but deeper emotional retention.</ins>

This trade-off was consistent. Users clicked less, skipped more tracks at first, and spent more time reading than listening. But when asked to recall what they discovered, they remembered the music from **Iceberg** and **Passport** with more detail. They recalled the genre name, the region, or a fact about the artist. Algorithmic discovery is efficient—it knows what fits. But contextual discovery leaves a stronger memory trace. It turns a song into a story. That story creates emotional texture. So while the algorithm may increase short-term engagement, context sustains long-term connection.

5. Do social listening rooms increase engagement?

<ins>Finding: Co-listening amplifies emotional intensity and interaction, especially in real time.</ins>

Headroom invited users to drop into live rooms where a song was already playing, with others reacting in chat. The feature sparked moments of shared emotional response—laughter, awe, nostalgia—that no solo playlist could deliver. Comments like “I didn’t expect to cry to this” or “Yo, this bass line is insane” turned listening into conversation. While not every room maintained momentum, the highs were memorable. Engagement wasn’t measured by likes or shares—it was measured in presence. Just being there, hearing the same thing as others, mattered.

6. What design elements best enable shared exploration?

<ins>Finding: Loose structure and casual participation drive better shared discovery than rigid hierarchy or gamification.</ins>

Headroom worked best when it felt like a group chat, not a stream or performance. Users could cue tracks, comment, or just observe. There were no leaderboards, likes, or audience counts. This design created a soft social contract—enough to feel real, not so much that it felt like work. The tone remained conversational. This balance—between structure and informality—proved key to keeping exploration light but meaningful.

7. Which metrics best capture algorithmic vs. serendipitous discovery?

<ins>Finding: Algorithmic success shows up in behavior data; serendipity shows up in memory and narrative.</ins>

Spotify optimizes for metrics like play-through rate, skip count, and repeat listens. These are useful for tuning recommendations. But they don’t capture the qualitative experience of discovering something unexpected and falling into it. Users who explored **Passport** or **Iceberg** tracks didn’t necessarily replay them the most—but they remembered them. They talked about them later. One user said, “I don’t know if I’d add this to my regular rotation, but I’m glad I found it.” That moment—curiosity without conversion—isn’t easily measured, but it’s exactly what serendipity looks like. New metrics will be needed if Spotify wants to build for discovery that goes beyond efficiency.

The most consistent theme across these findings is that users want permission—permission to slow down, wander, and make decisions that don’t optimize for outcome. They want interfaces that explain themselves and respect their time. They want to be invited, not nudged. And they want to feel that their musical identity is theirs to shape, not just something inferred from data.

Limitations & Open Questions

Every design gesture has its trade-offs. Even well-intentioned interventions—like Passport, Iceberg, and Headroom—operate within the constraints of platform logic, user behavior, and commercial reality. While these features aim to reintroduce agency, transparency, and social listening, they don't escape the ecosystem they challenge. This section lays out the limitations of these proposals, and the bigger questions they leave hanging.

1. Will Users Choose Exploration Over Convenience?

Spotify's success hinges on reducing friction. It's good at giving people what they didn't know they wanted, quickly. Features like **Passport** or **Iceberg** deliberately interrupt that rhythm. They ask the user to pause, make a choice, explore unfamiliar terrain. That's valuable—but it's also risky.

The open question is: how many users are willing to slow down? Will people who are used to passive scrolling choose to click "Travel" or "Dive"? And if not, do these features become decorative? Like Easter eggs for power users, while the majority remain inside the algorithmic comfort zone?

The limitation here isn't in the concept—it's behavioral. Discovery, when designed to be slow and intentional, competes with a system optimized for dopamine. If a feature takes more time, effort, or decision-making than the default autoplay, it may simply get bypassed.

2. Can Curated Experiences Scale?

Passport and **Iceberg** rely on a certain degree of human curation. Local tastemakers build playlists. Subgenre deep-dives require contextual knowledge. But Spotify is a platform at massive scale. How does this kind of labor-intensive discovery hold up when applied globally?

The Spotify model thrives on automation—user-generated playlists, algorithmic recommendations, editorial content produced at speed. Introducing localized, handpicked content at the level *Passport* suggests means investing in cultural expertise. Is that financially sustainable? Or will the pressure to scale dilute the quality that makes these features meaningful?

This tension is familiar in tech: the friction between handcrafted systems and automated ones. The moment human touch becomes cost-prohibitive, platforms default to patterns. And in doing so, they risk turning something designed for discovery into another loop.

3. What Does Transparency Really Mean in a Closed System?

Iceberg makes genres visible. It explains context, origins, and influence. But the core system behind Spotify's recommendations—the algorithm—is still largely opaque. No matter how much surface-level transparency a feature offers, it doesn't fundamentally change how the platform collects, processes, or prioritizes data.

So what does it mean to design for transparency within a system that doesn't share its engine?

This isn't a design flaw. It's a platform limitation. Designers can create windows—but the backend remains closed. Until Spotify makes its recommendation logic legible and editable to users (which would be a radical shift), any gesture toward transparency is partial.

The open question becomes: how much transparency is enough to rebuild trust? Can showing genre depth or offering geographic context offset the unease users feel when their feeds feel manipulated?

4. Will Social Listening Scale Without Turning into Noise?

Headroom introduces rooms where people listen together and react in real time. It simulates the energy of a listening party or a Twitch stream—low-stakes, high-intimacy. But moderation and quality control become major concerns as participation grows.

What happens when a room scales from 20 people to 2,000? Will chat become overwhelming? Will trolling or toxicity increase? How do you preserve emotional intimacy at scale?

Other platforms—Twitch, Discord, even Clubhouse—have grappled with this. The answer is usually a combination of moderation tools, user hierarchies, and algorithmic filtering. But each of these adds complexity, and in some cases, replicates the very hierarchies these features are trying to escape.

There's also the question of social fatigue. Listening with others can be powerful, but it can also be draining. If people begin to associate **Headroom** with performance—being seen, keeping up, reacting in real time—they might retreat back into solo listening.

5. What About Accessibility and Inclusion?

These features presume a certain level of cultural capital, digital fluency, and access to high-bandwidth devices. **Iceberg** assumes the user is interested in subgenre theory. **Passport** assumes global curiosity. *Headroom* assumes comfort with chat-driven interaction. But many users just want to listen while commuting, cooking, or studying.

How inclusive are these proposals in practice? Can they be adapted for different needs, neurodiverse users, or low-bandwidth environments? Are there ways to make them legible across languages, regions, and devices? The tension here is between richness and accessibility. The more layered and nuanced a feature becomes, the more it risks alienating users who aren't looking for complexity.

6. Do These Features Challenge or Coexist With the Algorithm?

At a strategic level, the project lives in a balancing act. It doesn't reject personalization entirely—it creates parallel spaces for different modes of listening. But Spotify's infrastructure is still built around the algorithm. Features that operate outside that logic are, by nature, exceptions.

So do **Passport**, **Iceberg**, and **Headroom** actually challenge the dominance of the algorithm? Or do they just create small islands of escape?

A more radical move would be to give users the ability to tune the algorithm itself—to expose its inner workings, let them choose what weights matter, or opt out entirely. These proposals stop short of that, likely for good reason. But the question remains: can alternative features shift platform culture, or do they get absorbed and neutralized?

7. What Happens if They Succeed?

Ironically, success could create new problems. If **Headroom** becomes wildly popular, does it turn into TikTok-style virality? If **Passport** gains traction, will Spotify begin packaging global culture into exportable playlists, flattening nuance?

Cultural capital is easily commodified. The features in this project resist that—but Spotify's business model does not. So even if these proposals are grounded in care, the platform may absorb them into its profit logic.

What guardrails need to be in place to prevent that drift? What does it look like to preserve the integrity of human-curated, slow, or social listening inside a scaled system?

Closing Thoughts

Designing alternative futures inside existing systems always involves compromise. The features proposed here are thoughtful interventions—but they're still bound by Spotify's logic. They can open space, but they can't rewrite the rules.

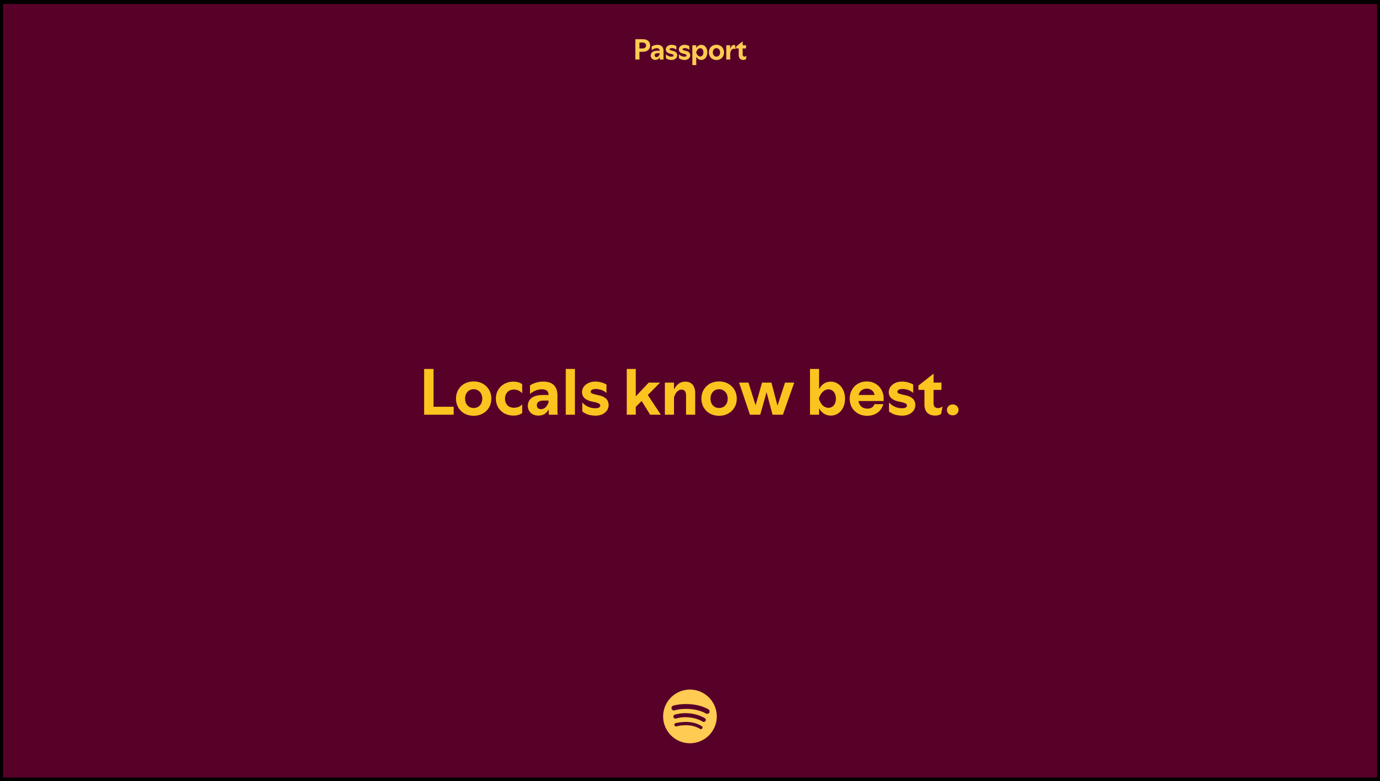
That's not a flaw. It's a condition.

These limitations and questions aren't roadblocks —they're the next layer of the conversation. They ask not just how to make better features, but how to rethink the relationship between users, platforms, and music. They open space for reflection: What does it mean to *really* listen in an age of recommendation?

And maybe more importantly: What kind of world are we building when music is no longer something we find—but something that finds us, over and over, until we forget how to search?

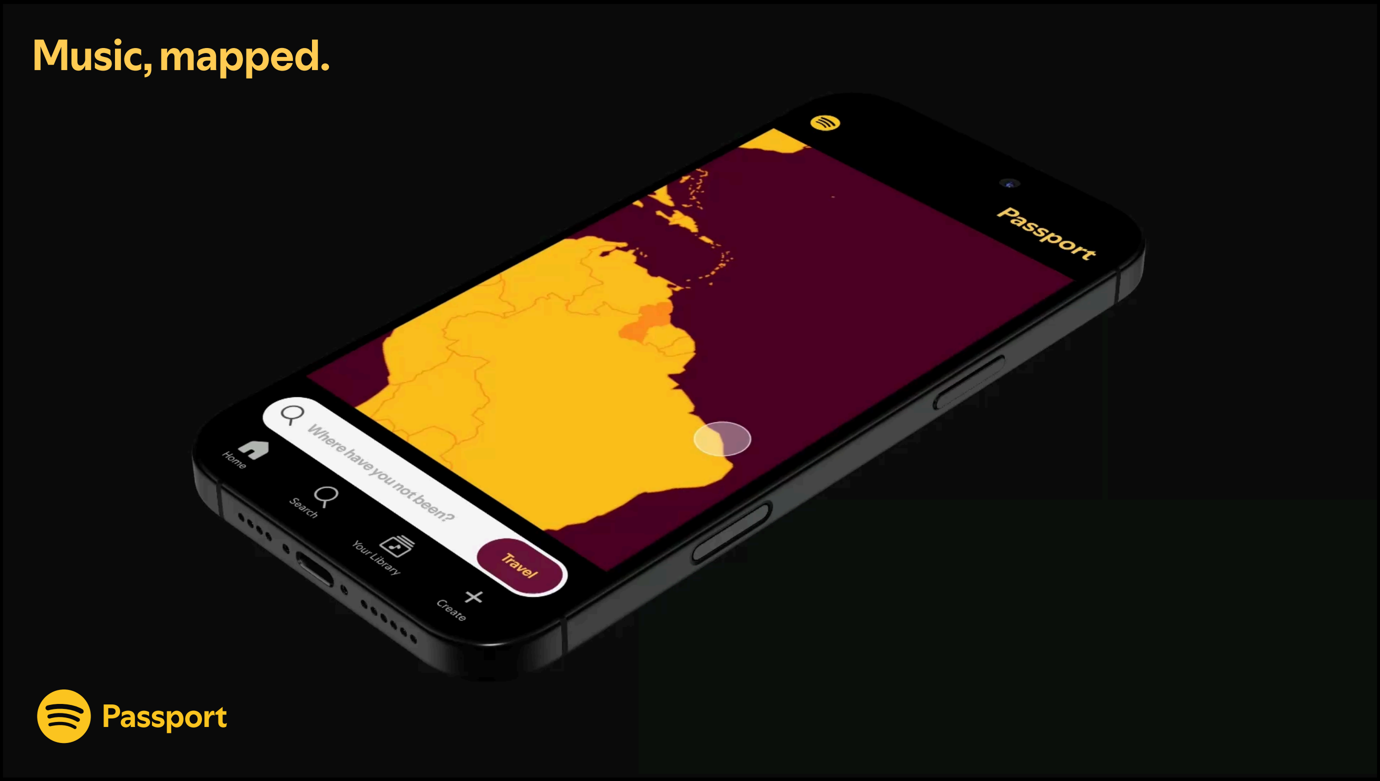
Gallery

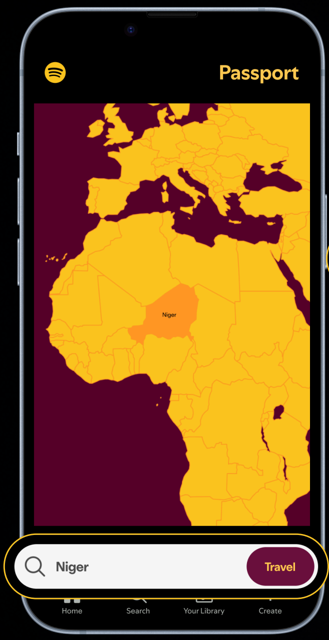
Passport



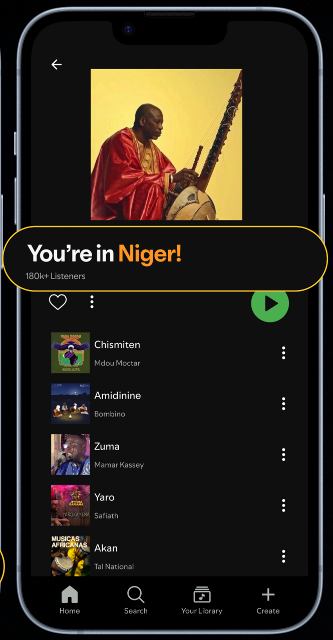
Passport

Locals know best.


Music, mapped.
Passport
Where have you not been?
Travel
Home
Search
Your Library
Create
Passport


Passport
Niger
Niger
Travel
Home
Search
Your Library
Create

Choose your destination

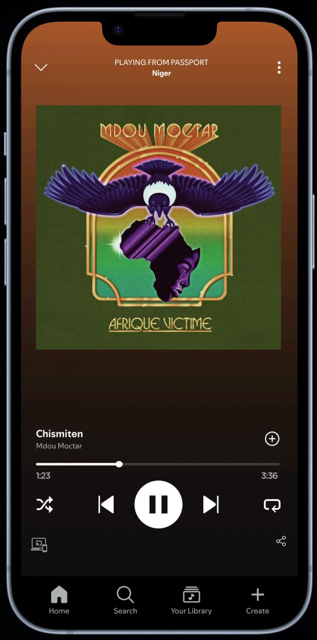

You're in Niger!

180k+ Listeners

Chismiten	Mdou Moctar
Amidinine	Bombino
Zuma	Mamar Kassey
Yaro	Safiath
Akan	Tal National

Home
Search
Your Library
Create

Find curated local playlist


PLAYING FROM PASSPORT
Niger

Chismiten
Mdou Moctar

MDOU MOCTAR
AFRIQUE VICTIME
1:23
3:36
Home
Search
Your Library
Create

Press play. Start your journey.

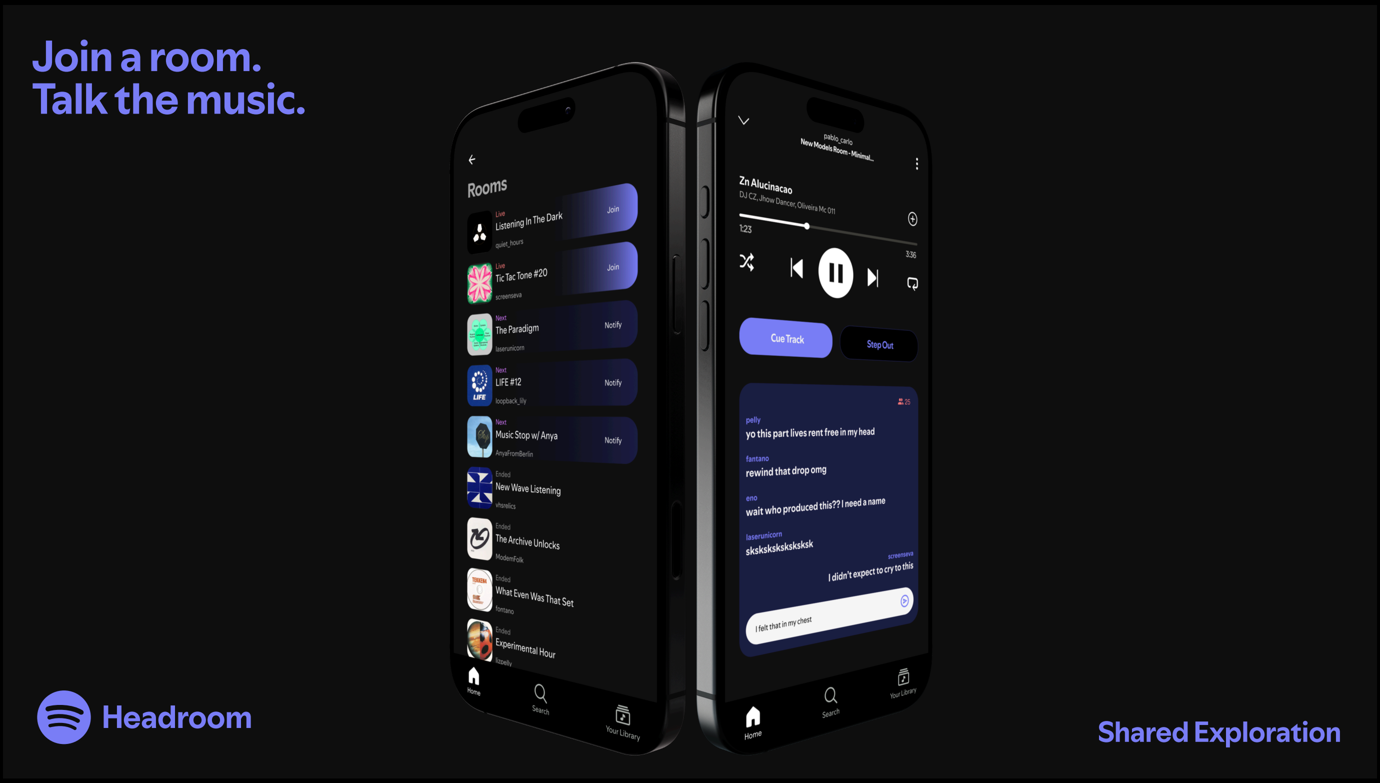
Passport
Locals know best.
DUNKIN' DONUTS
CLEAR CHANNEL

Passport
Hear the world the way locals do.
Passport
No visa needed

Headroom

Headroom

Different cities. Same song.
One room.



Join a room.
Talk the music.

Rooms
Live
Listening In The Dark
quiet_hours
Join
Live
Tic Tac Tone #20
screenseva
Join
Next
The Paradigm
laserunicorn
Notify
Next
LIFE #12
loopback_lily
Notify
Next
Music Stop w/ Anya
AnyaFromBerlin
Notify
Ended
New Wave Listening
vhsrelics
Ended
The Archive Unlocks
ModemFolk
Ended
What Even Was That Set
fontano
Ended
Experimental Hour
lizpelly
Home
Search
Your Library
pablo_carlo
New Models Room - Minimal...
Zn Alucinacao
DJ CZ, Jhow Dancer, Oliveira Mc 011
1:23
3:36
Cue Track
Step Out
25
Home
Search
Your Library

pelly
yo this part lives rent free in my head

fantano
rewind that drop omg

eno
wait who produced this?? I need a name

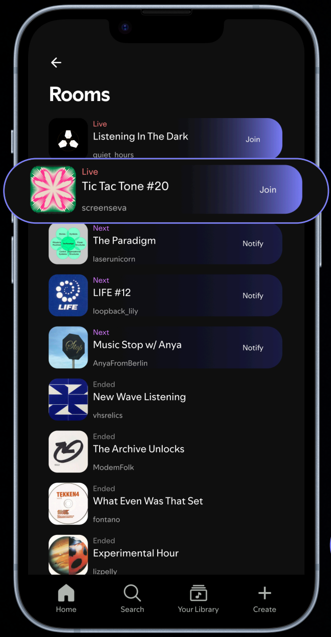
laserunicorn
sksksksksksksksk

screenseva
I didn't expect to cry to this

I felt that in my chest

Headroom

Shared Exploration


Rooms

Live
Listening In The Dark
quiet_hours
Join

Live
Tic Tac Tone #20
screenseva
Join

Next
The Paradigm
laserunicorn
Notify

Next
LIFE #12
loopback_lily
Notify

Next
Music Stop w/ Anya
AnyaFromBerlin
Notify

Ended
New Wave Listening
vhsrelics

Ended
The Archive Unlocks
ModemFolk

Ended
What Even Was That Set
fontano

Ended
Experimental Hour
lizpelly

Home
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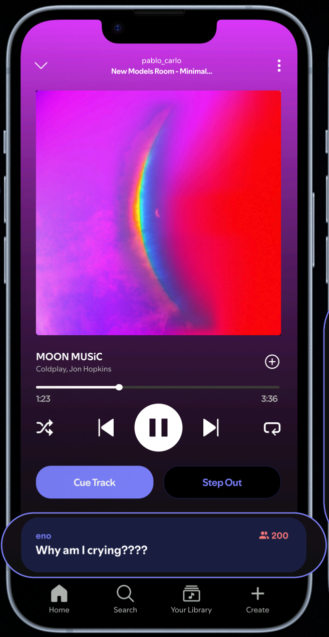
Join a live listening room


pablo_carlo
New Models Room - Minimal...
MOON MUSiC
Coldplay, Jon Hopkins
1:23
3:36
Cue Track
Step Out

eno
Why am I crying????
200

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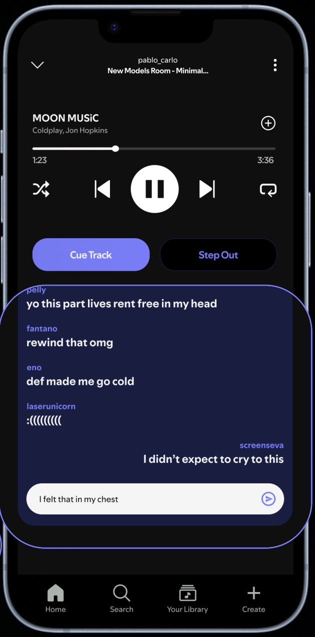
Preview the moment in real time


pablo_carlo
New Models Room - Minimal...
MOON MUSiC
Coldplay, Jon Hopkins
1:23
3:36
Cue Track
Step Out

pelly
yo this part lives rent free in my head

fantano
rewind that omg

eno
def made me go cold

laserunicorn
:(((((((((

screenseva
I didn't expect to cry to this

I felt that in my chest

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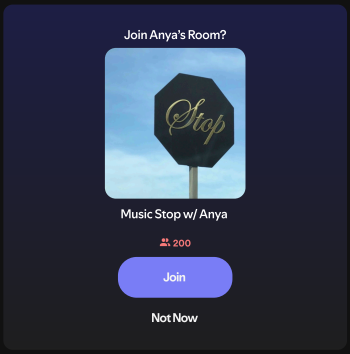
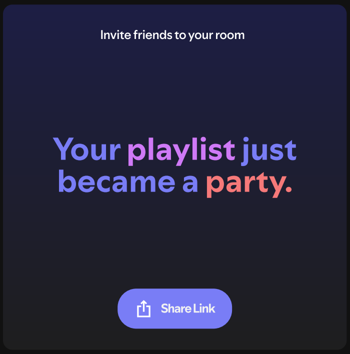
Chat, react, and feel together


Join Anya's Room?

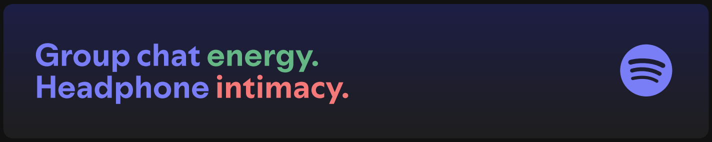
Music Stop w/ Anya

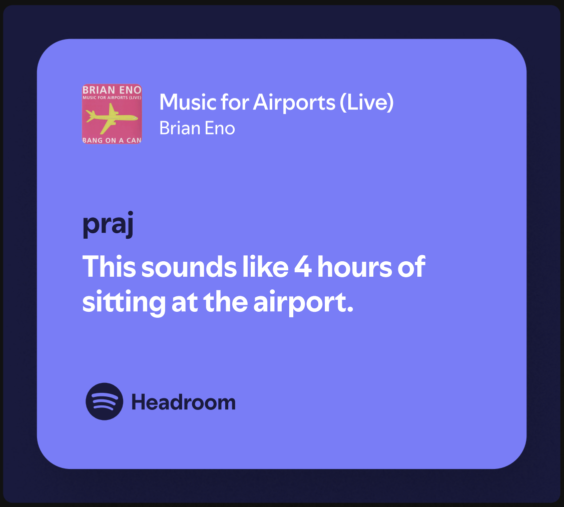
200

Join
Not Now


Invite friends to your room

Your playlist just became a party.


Group chat energy.
Headphone intimacy.

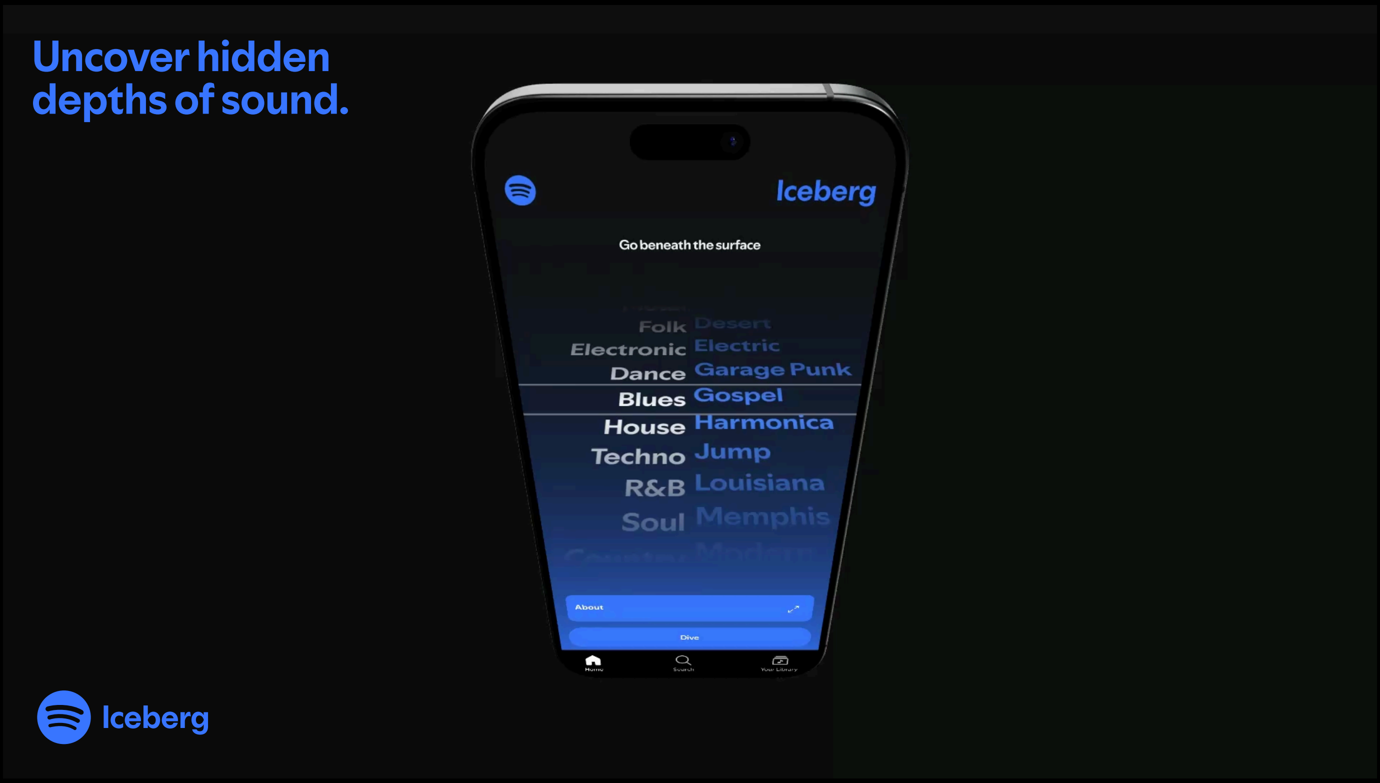

Music for Airports (Live)
Brian Eno

praj
This sounds like 4 hours of sitting at the airport.

Iceberg

Iceberg

Genres don’t
stop at the surface.



Uncover hidden
depths of sound.

Iceberg

Iceberg
Go beneath the surface
Folk Desert
Electronic Electric
Dance Garage Punk
Blues Gospel
House Harmonica
Techno Jump
R&B Louisiana
Soul Memphis
About
Dive
Home
Search
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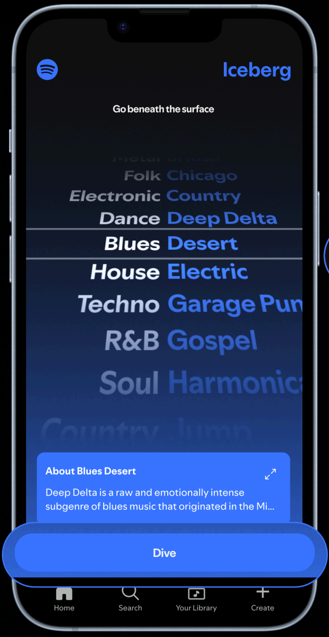
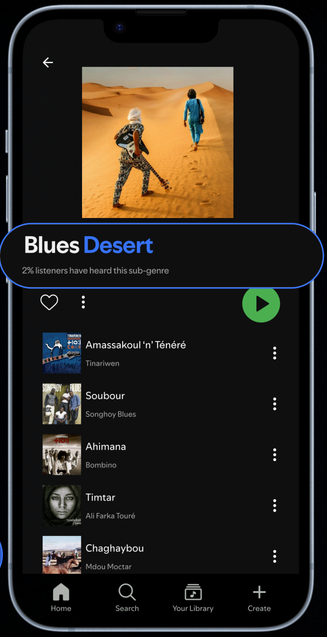

Iceberg
Go beneath the surface
Folk Chicago
Electronic Country
Dance Deep Delta
Blues Desert
House Electric
Techno Garage Pun
R&B Gospel
Soul Harmonic
Country Jump
Dive
Home
Search
Your Library
Create

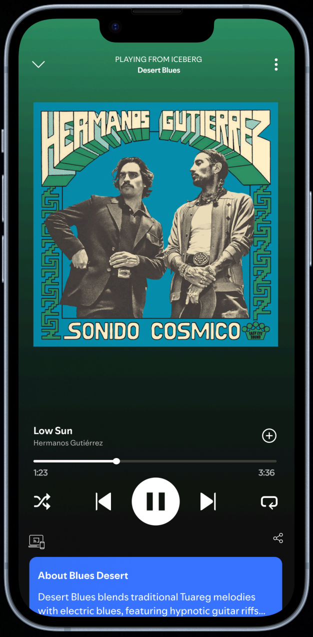
About Blues Desert

Deep Delta is a raw and emotionally intense subgenre of blues music that originated in the Mi...

Select a genre and sub-genre


Blues Desert
2% listeners have heard this sub-genre
Amassakoul 'n' Ténéré
Tinariwen
Soubour
Songhoy Blues
Ahimana
Bombino
Timtar
Ali Farka Touré
Chaghaybou
Mdou Moctar
Home
Search
Your Library
Create

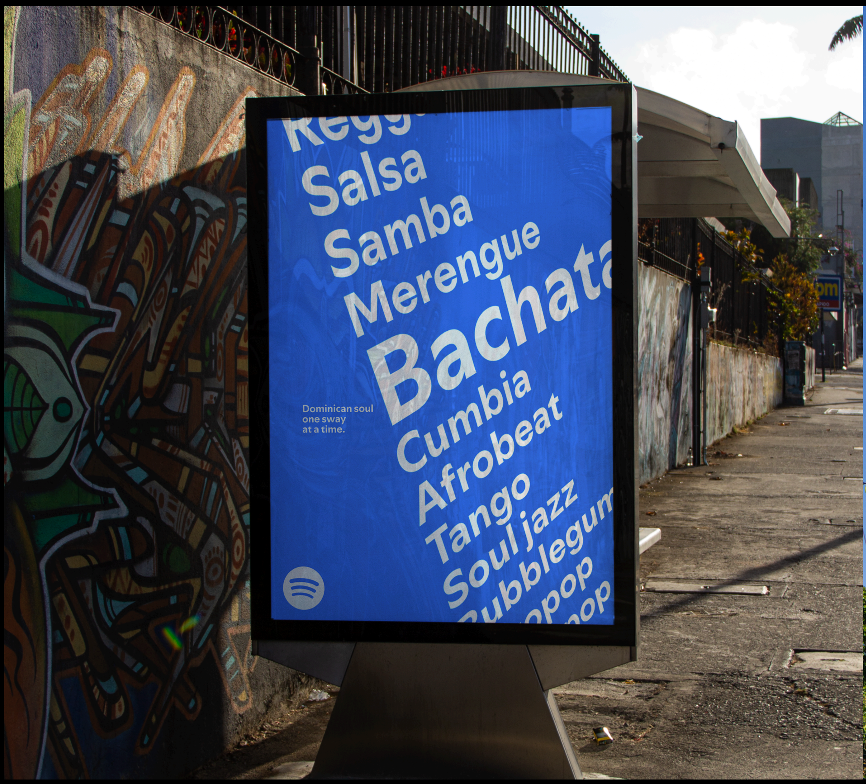
Browse curated playlists

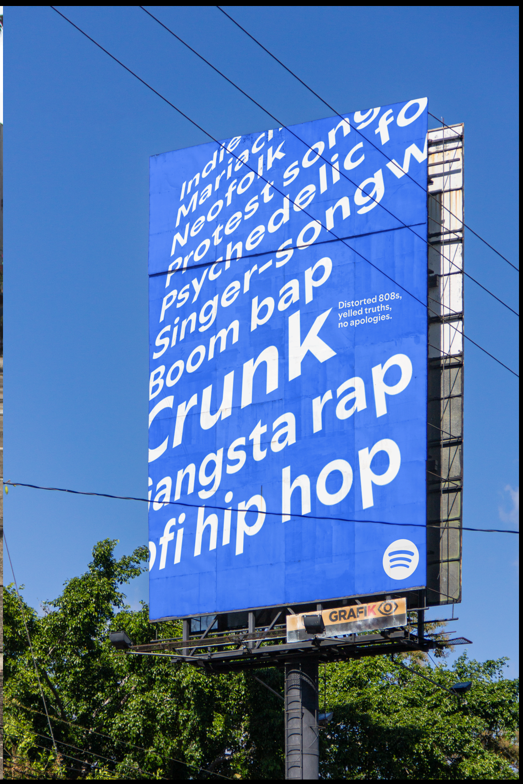

PLAYING FROM ICEBERG
Desert Blues
HERMANOS GUTIERREZ
SONIDO COSMICO
Low Sun
Hermanos Gutiérrez
1:23
3:36

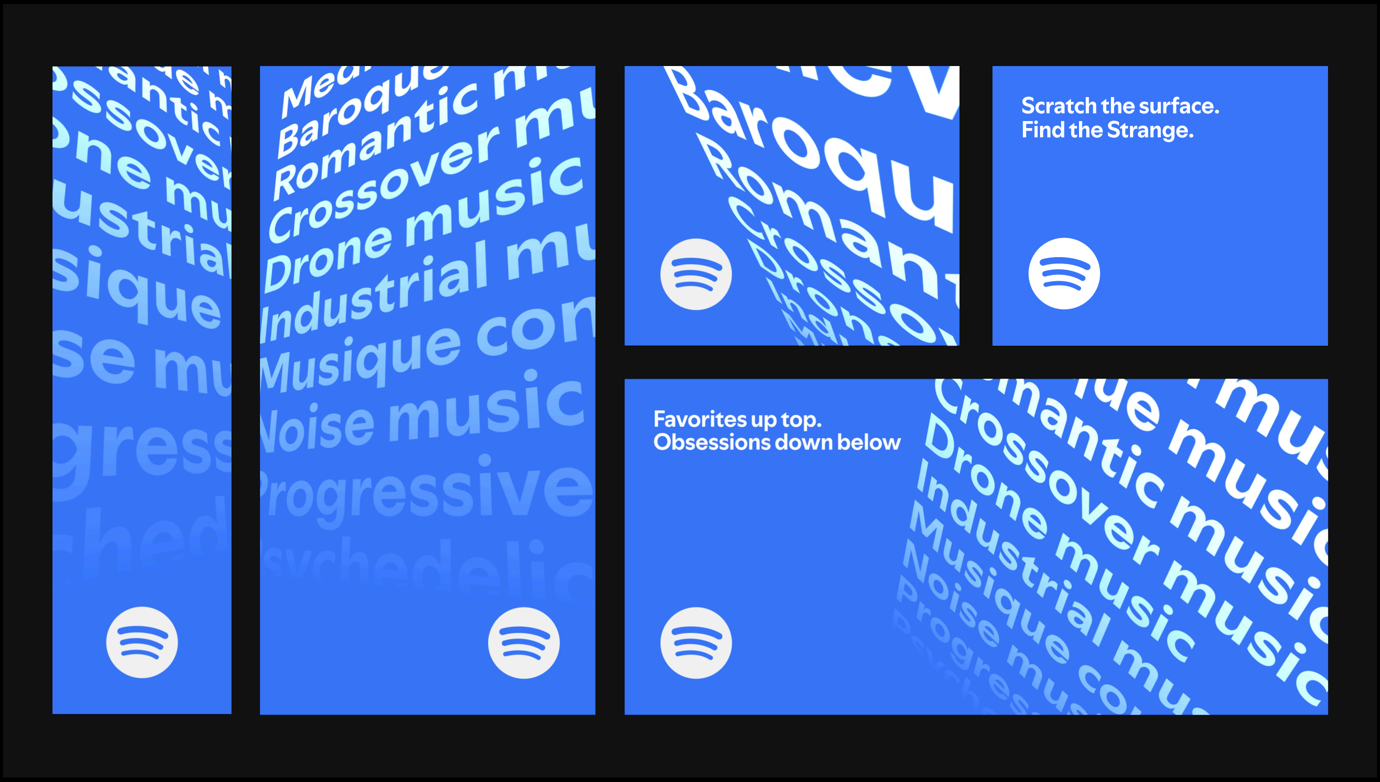
About Blues Desert

Desert Blues blends traditional Tuareg melodies with electric blues, featuring hypnotic guitar riffs...

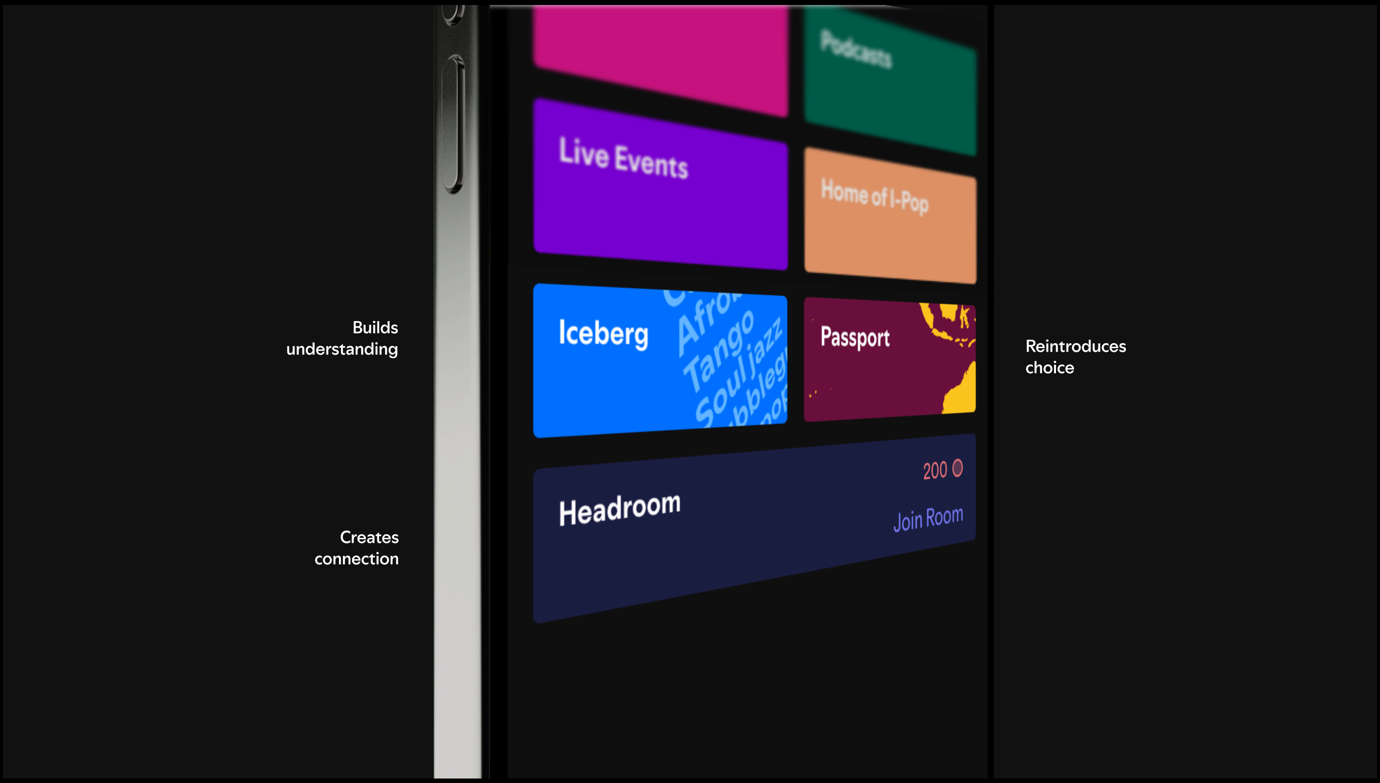
Start listening and explore


Reggae
Salsa
Samba
Merengue
Bachata
Cumbia
Afrobeat
Tango
Soul jazz
Bubblegum
pop
Dominican soul
one sway
at a time.


Indie
Mariachi
Neofolk
Protest song
Psychedelic fo
Singer-songw
Boom bap
Crunk
Gangsta rap
Lofi hip hop
Distorted 808s,
yelled truths,
no apologies.
GRAFIKO


Baroque
Romantic mu
Crossover mu
Drone music
Industrial mu
Musique con
Noise music
Progressive
Psychedelic
Scratch the surface.
Find the Strange.
Favorites up top.
Obsessions down below

Search screen


Podcasts
Live Events
Home of I-Pop
Iceberg
Afro
Tango
Souljazz
Passport
Headroom
200
Join Room

Builds
understanding

Creates
connection

Reintroduces
choice

Elisava

Master Beyond Branding

2025